

## Love, Richie by kaspbraktm

**Category:** IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

**Genre:** M/M, a lot of pining and unnecessary complications, also side benverly for the children, they're soulmates your honor

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris

**Relationships:** Ben Hanscom & Beverly Marsh, Ben Hanscom/Beverly Marsh, Eddie Kaspbrak & Richie Tozier, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier

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**Summary:**

Before the beginning of the new school year, Richie Tozier finds a post from a closeted kid on the Derry High gossip tumblr. On impulse, he creates an email account to anonymously respond to the post. Little does he know the person who submitted the post is Eddie Kaspbrak, the same Eddie Kaspbrak who had stopped being friends with him in hope of keeping the secret they both share. What will happen when their undercover correspondence brings them closer than before?

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Basically, a Love, Simon inspired AU. Enjoy!

# 1. Chapter 1

POST ON: [derryhighsecrets.tumblr.com](https://derryhighsecrets.tumblr.com)

SUBMITTED BY: [iamstandingup@gmail.com](mailto:iamstandingup@gmail.com)

Derry High,

School is two weeks away. I feel that is too far away, and not close enough. On one hand, I feel eager and ready to go back a steady routine. To seeing my friends and being out from seven to seven. On the other hand, it all feels like a farce, in a way. Because my friends don't really know me, I don't think. Or at least one important thing about me. That during the summer I don't care to look at bikinis, or skirts, or sunbathing girls. Not like that. I'd like to look at the surfers, if we actually lived near a beach, or if surfers were my type. Maybe they are. I haven't found my type yet; I just know girls are not it. I feel ready to go back to school, I want to. I'm just not ready to go back to pretending. I feel like I'm perpetually performing in a clown circus, where all anyone can see is the face I've painted on. I'd just like to have someone to show my real face to.

Posted: July 22, 2019

When Richie Tozier reads this post, it's July 27, almost at two am. He's not the best at keeping a sane sleeping schedule during summer vacation. He's not the best at keeping up with internet gossip, either—especially the lame sort that usually makes it to the Derry High tumblr—which is why he finds this particular post buried a few days late and under a few others that had almost made him give up on the blog for the night. The week. Maybe the month.

But holy moly (or *shit*, is more like it), is he glad he didn't. Reading it he feels as if someone read his fuzzy, scrambled head and put the even fuzzier feeling buried way, way back into something *coherent*. Coherent, and sophisticated and, what the hell, a little bit poetic. He reads it over and over and over and over again, nodding along to every word. You're not the only one, [iamstandingup@gmail.com](mailto:iamstandingup@gmail.com).

He finds his hands doing what his mouth often does, which is: whatever they want without asking and tripping over themselves.

They've impulsively opened gmail, logged out, and clicked on 'create a new account'.

By the time the rational part of his head catches up with them, the rest of him is too possessed to do anything to stop him. Possessed by the need to say just that: *you're not the only one. I'm not the only one. We're not the only ones.* So before he can think it over twice, he's typing and retyping the following:

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com

TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com

DATE: July 27, 3:13 AM

SUBJECT: Baby, you're not the only one – wisdom by NSYNC

My esteemed Sir,

Pardon me for taking the liberty to assume you are a Sir, and for promptly mailing you. But you see, when I saw your dilemma I felt utterly flummoxed. I was moved and touched by your words, and compelled to tell thee, thou are not the only one in such a conundrum! I, too am impartial to the fairer sex, and feel though as if I am constantly putting on a charade. The injustice! The despair! How unfair it is, pretending to find the fairer sex fair! But thou see, I am a jester by nature! Haha! ...

Which is why I started this e-mail in such a ridiculous way. I hope you're still reading it, if you opened it. If you made it past that first bad paragraph, congratulations. You passed the test. You won one million dollars. No, but, really, I get everything you said. I *get* it, if you get me. And you put it better than I think I could, if I tried to put it down in words. You've just seen my attempt at serious words. Anyway. That's all I wanted to say, from struggling Sir to Sir. You're not the only one.

Is it weird that I wrote to you at all? If it is, feel free to ignore it. And good luck this year, I guess. Keep on clowning!

Au Revoir,

Monsieur Or-Tale.

He clicks send, and falls right back asleep. By morning (okay, afternoon) having written the email, having *sent* it, feels like a foggy dream. The kind you're not sure if you dreamed or actually happened, and you convince yourself it didn't. Since it didn't happen, he doesn't expect a response. He can't hope for one, can he? He doesn't. He doesn't make sure the post itself is even real, let alone check the email account.

But that means he doesn't bother to see if he'd *really* made it, so he isn't logged out of it either. When his phone goes *PING!* two days later in the middle of the night (for him, eight in the morning for the rest of the world), he can hardly believe the notification on the screen. Let alone what he reads, when he clicks it open.

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: July 29, 8:03 AM  
SUBJECT: RE: Baby, you're not the only one – wisdom by NSYNC

Mr. Or-Tale (?),

It's only weird if you make it weird, clown. You know, like using three different types of English in the same paragraph? Also, I expect my million dollars. Being serious, I can see you wrote to me in the middle of the night, so I won't judge you ... too harshly. Neither of us needs any extra judgement. Thank you for writing, and for the good wishes. I think I'll feel a little better next week knowing someone feels the same way I do. I hope you have a good year too. And start going to bed at a reasonable time, maybe? There are only five days left and it can be a shock to your system to suddenly adapt it to a different rhythm. Just saying.

Sincerely,  
Davy Jones

P.S. No, it's not a Pirates of the Caribbean reference

P.P.S. I just wanted to clarify, since any reference should be acceptable to someone who referenced NSYNC.

Richie chuckles, jolted fully awake by then, and starts typing ...

## 2. Chapter 2

### Summary for the Chapter:

The first day of school. Richie looks for a topic of conversation.

### Notes for the Chapter:

TW: Slur being used! this probably applies for the whole fic since Bowers will be introduced later on so ... yeah

Richie Tozier walks into Derry High with this phone in his pocket. First reason for that being Derry High has a randomly severe 'no phones during school hours' policy, randomly meaning sometimes they couldn't care less about it and other days just reaching for your pocket gets you detention. Second reason being, he's avoiding it. He's avoiding the opened email he's spent five days reading over and over, tempted to reply but unsure if he should. It's the root of all his problems, ever, really. Not knowing when to shut up. Or how to.

It's a weird thought, knowing this Davy might be –no, is, for sure – roaming the same hallways and maybe, maybe thinking about the same thing. *You're somewhere around here.* And by responding, ladies and gentlemen, Richie Tozier might let his tongue roll off again where it's clearly unwanted. Davy probably only wrote back to be polite, and doesn't want to start randomly e-mailing some nosy kid who poked into what was, come think about, *obviously* a very personal post. Yeah, that's what it was. He wrote back to be nice, say: 'Hey, I hear ya, bud! Thanks'. Same reason he'd written to him in the first place. He'd even put the word thanks in there. It'd been just a nod, a pat on the back. An acknowledgement. A that's all folks, thank you and goodbye.

He won't let himself overthink it. He'll just keep walking, get his schedule, find his locker, go to class.

But then again, his email had said 'feel free to ignore it'. And Davy hadn't. He'd even signed, and left a little P.S. Two of them. *You're*

*somewhere around here. And maybe you want me to write back. Do you?*

Mike snaps him back into reality by putting his hand on his shoulder in greeting, smiling that oaky smile of his. Oaky as in somehow old, and somehow fresh.

“Hiya Mister! Come on over, say how you do, how you do!”, Richie says, leading to a completely improvised handshake.

“How you do, Richie, how you do,” Mike does his best to follow with an amused smile, and soon enough Bill steps into the scene. “H-Hi guys” he says softly, but smiling broadly enough to make up for it.

The bell is meant to ring soon and it shows, people let them know it's time to move it via light shoves and pushes. The three boys get going, exchanging their new locker numbers. They're not surprised to see they've all got Homeroom. “See you guys th-there.” They split, not before Bill quickly turns to ask: “Anyone seen Buh-Bev?”

The two boys shake their heads, and Richie turns with a shrug. He realises how it hadn't occurred to him to look for his friends when he arrived. First day of school one-oh-one and he'd skipped it. The first thought he'd had was that Davy was there, and whether Davy would think or care at all that he was there too. Not the best way to go about it, Tozier. Not the way to go at all, considering what he'd done bordered on stalker behavior and he should not be expecting a response.

To shake the thought off his head, he rushes to his locker, drops his basics in and leaves empty handed. No one needs a notebook for *Homeroom*.

Luckily the classroom's nearby, and he arrives to a half-empty version of it. On The Couch sit Eddie and Stan. It's an old couch, but it's coveted by every junior student. Not only because it's positioned right in the middle of the room, but because it's comfortable and talked about since the beginning of freshman year. It surprises him to find Eddie and Stan of all people sitting on it, considering the rumours of what the poor couch has witnessed and being used for.

He has to stand by the doorframe to take that awkward punch in, and

decide what to do about next. The awkward aspect comes in the nature of his relationship with Eddie and Stan. They're *half*-friends, which is somehow worse than being strangers. Friends enough that he should say at the very least 'hi', but not friends enough that he feels comfortable bringing himself to their attention just to say 'Hi'. Though he wants to, because to be half-friends, you have to have been *good* friends once.

Once for them being throughout all of Elementary School, and the early beginning of Middle School. Stan more so than Eddie. Stan The Man. Ten-year-old Richie would've called him his very best friend, no questions asked. And Eddie. Eddie. Eddie had been more than that. Not his best friend, but beyond something beyond that. He couldn't then, but he can put a name to it now: He'd *liked* Eddie. A lot. Owning up to it: he still does. A little.

It's hard not to, even if they hardly speak as often, or as loudly, or as ... whatever way they it was used to, before. How a line drew itself to mark a before and an after Richie doesn't know, and it's something he dreads to figure out. If you were to ask him, he would say it was just a thing that happened. Things hadn't changed from one day to the next, and he couldn't exactly bring himself be mad or bitter. It would be futile to try and point out a date, or a month, or a specific moment even, when they'd changed. They just had. Come middle school, Eddie had just started drifting. Richie'd been sure, wanted to be sure, that it hadn't been on purpose. That Eddie hadn't known, sensed somehow, what Richie felt and said 'No thanks'.

No, he'd wanted to believe that hadn't been it. He couldn't bear for that to be it. He's fine not figuring it out. He's fine believing it'd just been both of them growing up. That day by day Eddie'd cared a little bit less about his jokes, and gotten a bit slower with his witty replies until they'd just turned into eye rolls and a swift change of subject just because he was growing up and out of them. He still scrunched his nose, shook his head, or even snapped something back every now and then, which made it worth trying. That he'd started partnering up with Ben for things, instead of him, because Ben was shy and didn't have anyone else. Between him and Eddie, he supposed any other shy kid would've gravitated towards Eddie too. Richie understood that.

Stan had stuck firmly by him at first, but slowly drifted too. Not as far as Eddie, but still what felt like an endless distance.

Elementary school had been Bill, Stan Eddie and Richie. *Rich and Eds*. All of a sudden, middle school became Eddie, Ben and Stan on one side of the lunch table, on the other, Bill, Mike, Richie and Bev. He suspects Bev and Stan are the only reason why in High School they're sitting at the same table at all. He would say his very best friend is Bev now, probably tied with Bill. Eddie and Stan three seats and a thousand, billion miles away.

Too late to do something now. In the words of Frank Sinatra, *that's life*.

"Hey Rich", Bev finally appears with a beaming smile. He still doesn't know whether to sit with Stan and Eddie or break it off once and for all this year. For him it's barely hanging by a thread, what's the difference?

She makes the choice for him, placing her hand on his back to swiftly slide both of them inside and heads for the couch, careless in her white cotton dress and bright red coat. Thank God for Bev, but also, goddammit, Bev.

"Miss Scarlett" he bows, following.

Time either slows down or speeds up, because by the time he notices, Ben has also made it to the classroom and the couch. He's taking the seat next to Eddie. That leaves one empty instead of two, and Bev takes it. Inevitably, Ben, Stan and Eddie wave at him. Only Stan seems to mean it. He waves back.

"Hi", "Hey", "Hello", they say, making him think of a Barber Shop Trio.

"Top of the morning to you" he responds in a -if he may say so himself -*heck* of a cockney accent. He tips an imaginary hat and slides his glasses up his nose. The Barber Shop Trio smiles awkwardly. Ben's the one who means it this time. "Thanks?" Eddie's nose twitches, undecihperable. Richie takes the seat behind the couch.



After what feels like a small eternity, Bill arrives, then Mike, then Mrs. Gorey and the day officially begins.

As it goes by, he finds the thought of writing to Davy about his first day bouncing in his head like the white dot on the screen during a game of Pong. Beep yes, Mrs. Gorey took ten minutes to get the projector to work during homeroom, and someone hit the Ripsom girl's hair with a disgusting paper and glue ball in the meantime. Beep no, if he is a junior, he already knows that story. Duh. Beep *whatever*. Beep yes the pizza in the cafeteria was great for a change, and everyone had it so it's not specifically nosy. Beep no, want to talk about the weather, Mr. Producer? That's just as interesting!

The dot keeps bouncing from wall to wall, and the game only shuts when almost before the end of lunch, Bill says the words drama club.

"I-I-It's suh-suh-supposed to help with my ss-ss-speech therapy. It's muh-muh-mandatory for me this year. Have you signed up yet, Richie?"

"No," he takes a huge bite of his pizza, "going right after I'm done wolfing down this puppy". Crumbs fly everywhere.

"Chew and then talk, please", says Eddie, who is eating his slice with a knife and fork. He also has a thousand grease stained napkins around it. All the cholesterol squeezed right out, he'd say. Richie tries to think of what he would've responded five years ago, and for once opts to shut it and just chew louder, looking right at him with a tomato sauce grin. Equally annoying, but more on a *half-friend* scale.

"Great! We can all go together then" says Bev, omitting the bickering from the conversation. She smiles at Richie, who chants "Aye, aye!" with the matching soldier hand gesture.

"Okay by me" adds Ben, which puzzles Richie a little. He didn't know Ben that well, but he knew him well enough to know that wasn't his scene. Not by a long, out of the stadium shot.

"I think I'll go after last period, if you don't mind," Eddie announces, at which Richie perks up in interest. *That's* newer than new. "I don't think anyone will be fighting for tech jobs anyway, and I rather not waste my last few minutes on the queue and risk being late." *That*

makes more sense.

“We have to sign up for Basketball try outs. *That* will be a queue” sighs Stan, the only person in the world who would pour a packet of Worcestershire sauce on the last square inch of pizza left on his plate.

“I think it’s *insane* that they make you try out again. The stress of it! I guess it makes sense to make sure you’re still in apt physical condition, but there could be an, I don’t know, separate evaluation for that” comments Eddie, without looking up from his slice.

“It’s not, really” Mike smiles at Eddie, “coach’s just trying to make sure we’re still fit for the same position, but we’re practically guaranteed a spot.”

Eddie shrugs. "If you're not bothered by it, who am I to be"

“Huh. Guess all the queueing and trying out makes it a bit hard for anyone to just try new things, doesn’t it? If you don’t know what club or activity you want to join from day one, you’re doomed” says Bev, giving Richie just the thing he was looking for.

Now *that’s* something to write about, isn’t it? A good opener. The idea of writing the email right there and then crosses his mind. First day should be an easy day on the random phone policing. But nuh-uh. If it isn’t and anyone read his message out loud ... he’ll just make a mental note of it instead. What the fuck! He’s feeling giddy just at the idea of possibly having something to email some stranger about. Except that stranger could, should, realistically, be sitting there and then. Okay, so it’s exciting to think about. So What.

He realises he’s lost trail of the conversation, so he waits for it to wrap up and follows Bev towards the rest of the day. The half left. He’ll sign up, go to class, go home, and THEN.

## Notes for the Chapter:

hello ooof maybe i'm updating to fast but i'm just really inspired and excited for this au so if you're enjoying it comments and kudos would mean

everything to me. thank you!

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Summary for the Chapter:

A batch of the first e-mails exchanged between 'Davy' and 'Tale'

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: August 5, 7:20 pm  
SUBJECT: SYSTEM SHOCK!!!

Mr. Jones,

I'm just here to inform you, high authority on how first day of classes should be done, that I survived mine. Three-star rating and no shocks to my system. Since you're the high authority, I would also like to inquire as to how yours went. Hope you didn't experience any shocks to your system, other than maybe seeing my very fine bootyass and hoping I'm the charismatic young Monsieur you've recently corresponded with. Speaking of shocks to people's systems, do anything to shock your friends today? Sign up for something wild and unexpected?

I didn't, but I kind of wish I had. Something that would blow my friends' minds. I don't know. I feel it could be good to surprise them sometimes, you know? But the longer you've known people, the harder it gets. And boy oh boy, do we have a surprise for them! Like I said, wish I had. Throw some other surprises before, blow their minds bit by bit so the final strike won't feel so kamikaze. Not that my final strike is coming anytime soon, HAHA, but still. What do you think?

I expect a full status report,

Mr. Or-Tale.

P.S. You're an authority so please be professional and don't use emojis. Especially if you TYPED THEM OUT and they turned into those monsters. Thanks bye!

---

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: August 5, 8:57 pm  
SUBJECT: RE: SYSTEM SHOCK!!!

Mr. Or-Tale,

The wildest and most unexpected thing that happened to me today was having to read the word bootyass, so thanks for that. I'd give my day a Three-Star rating also. Nothing was bad, but I don't think anything was particularly good, either. Any day I get to leave my house and drink a cherry coke has an automatic three-star rating.

About the surprises, you may be right. You sound like you've known your friends for a very long time. I suppose all of us in Derry have. I'm sorry, I don't think we should be talking about our friends. Or the things we are doing at school that may or may not be mind blowing.

To be honest, I'm a little scared to be writing to you. I'm not mad or creeped or weirded out or anything, just scared. Scared of you figuring out who I am. Posting what I posted was as wild and unexpected as I can ever expect to get. Sorry, this is getting sad and I don't want it to be. Scary as it is, writing to you is fun too?

I hope this isn't a prank. If it is, please stop. If it isn't, sorry again. Unless you were thinking about my bootyass. Please tell me you weren't. K

Very sincerely,

Davy.

P.S. :P

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FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE. August 5, 11:29 pm  
SUBJECT: RE: SYSTEM SHOCK!!!

Davy,

So we're signing with first names now? Oh-La-La. And you don't want me to think about your bootyass? Tsk. Just kidding. I won't if your bootyass drinks Cherry Cola. I have a very strict Pepsi policy. Which is tortuous, since we only have coke vending machines at school. I should go on strike. EQUAL PEPSI AND COKE RIGHTS.

And I get it, Davy boy. I'm not exactly telling you who I am either. But I think writing to you is fun, too (I mean duh, I'm the one harassing you) and I promise I'm not messing with you. It's liberating, being able to tell someone I'm thinking of bootyass. Bootyass bootyass bootyass. That's a total of seven bootyasses for your day.

You're very welcome,

Tale.

P.S. I am begging you to not. BOOTYASS. Eight.

---

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: August 8, 7:18 pm  
SUBJECT: Stop saying [THAT WORD]

Tale,

First of all, please refer to the subject of the email. Second, I'm glad you're aware this is harassment. But seriously, I'm glad you decided to write to me too. It is like a double agent thing! Only for me it feels more like triple agent. Or a Russian Doll. There's the me I get to be at home. Then there's the me I get to be at school. And finally the person who not only read [I WON'T TYPE IT], but also wrote it down a few times. And I'm glad he can get to be out there, somewhere.

Also, I'm beginning to get seriously concerned about the amount of time you seem to spend thinking about [YOU KNOW WHAT]. It's weird because even though I was the one who made that post and I really, really, feel that way, I also don't think about it all that much?

I think I'm too busy thinking about hiding it to really, really think about it. I don't mean [IT] but liking someone and that someone being a boy. I guess I just haven't felt that way about anyone in a while. Or I just haven't even let myself consider it.

It's horrible ...the icky feeling that you're like ... radioactive. And if you spread out just a little you can ruin the life of someone that has nothing to do with it. Not that I think we are diseased or anything, I know we aren't! But the people in small towns are. Their ideas, I mean. Wow. I'm sure that sounded very uplifting and cheerful about our situation. I hereby attach a picture of a cute pomeranian to compensate and spread joy :D.

Sorry!  
Davy.

---

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: August 9, 7:02 am  
SUBJECT: RE: Stop saying [THAT WORD]

Davy,

WOW ALRIGHT. I'm SUPER RELIEVED. In fact, I might go down to city hall and suggest we have our first pride next year, how's about that? The cute Pomeranian gives me that much confidence and joy! No seriously it was super cute. Almost as cute as you refusing to write BOOTYASS.

And I totally get what you mean, ha ha : ) (please note the sarcasm in this emoji. That's what typed emojis are for). I know we're not supposed to talk about our friends but, having a crush on one of my friends when I was younger was ROUGH. I feel like I handled it all wrong and he hates me now :D

Not because of anything related to the way people here think about gay people, but because I was so weird around him. An all ages freak show! Guess one of the advantages of our lifestyle is the heteros are SO DENSE AND OBLIVIOUS my deliriously good flirting techniques

went by unnoticed. If we'd been girl and boy, I suspect we would've definitely heard some sing-song K I S S I N G. Which, yeah, its icky to think I could've dragged him into a mess like that.

Guess not liking anyone while we live in this dump is our safer chance. Or, we can always fall hopelessly in love with each other and have a torrid email romance. Wink.

JK don't stop replying to me!  
Tale.

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FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: August 9, 10:02 pm  
SUBJECT: RE: Stop saying [THAT WORD]

No comment. :|

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FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: August 11, 11:42 am  
SUBJECT: I witnessed a tragedy

Davy,

I have to say, I am EXTEMELY concerned about you sir. I couldn't help but notice you responded to our latest exchange on a Friday at precisely 10:02 pm. Tsk tsk tsk. That means one of two things: either you were RECKLESSLY responding to our SUPER SEXY INTIMATE ELECTRONIC EMAILS, BOOTYASS, in public or you were home all by your sad, sad lonesome on a Friday night. And I just have to say, Davy my boy, the latter worries me more than the former.

Seriously dude. I don't mean to like ... shame you or anything if you WERE home, and I know we're not supposed to talk about our friend groups or anything but? I don't know. I noticed it and I guess I had to ask. I promise I'm not being nosy but it's just funny. You didn't strike me as the type to wild out on Fridays and I guess I just noticed I was



right. Guess something about me now so I feel less stalker ish? Or correct me if I'm wrong.

Sincerely,  
Tale.

---

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: August 14, 8:00 pm  
SUBJECT: RE: I witnessed a tragedy

Tale,

Or should I say stalker? I wish I could tell you you're wrong but ... you aren't. I was, indeed, home at ten pm on a Friday, as I am most Fridays simply because I enjoy getting home early, before the stalkers start coming out at night. Surely you understand :). Also, because my house is really strict on curfews. And on most things, if I'm being honest. I drink cherry coke at school because I'd never get to drink any at home. Not without having my stomach pumped after. Your stalkerish ways probably figured it out by now, but it's part of the reason I made the post I made. School is liberating to me, but I suppose nowhere else felt liberating enough, until I got myself a stalker.

As for my turn to guess, I rather we don't play this game. But if I absolutely had to, I would say ... you do wild out on Fridays? Which leads to what I noticed on our very first conversation: you have terrible sleeping patterns.

Hope you're going to sleep at a reasonable time or aren't reading this until tomorrow,

Davy.

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FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: August 15, 03: 25 am

SUBJECT: RE: I witnessed a tragedy

:D :D :D

**Notes for the Chapter:**

I'M REALLY LETTING MYSELF GO AND SHOULD  
PACE THE UPDATES BUT I'M REALLY EXCITED.  
Anyhoot, please share your thoughts and / or drop  
kudos.

## 4. Chapter 4

### Summary for the Chapter:

It's the beginning of spirit week, and Eddie Kaspbrak follows certain rules. About it and about himself.

Eddie Kaspbrak leads a particular life. Not in the sense of it being particularly interesting, or particularly odd – in the sense of *pickiness*. He would be the first to admit it's a childish way to describe it, yet he can't think of a better word. Unlike Stanley, whose own particular pickiness draws them together, he doesn't consider himself picky out of will. He considers himself picky out of need. Out of mere survival instinct. Pickiness, it seems to Eddie, comes in an entertaining way for Stanley. Stanley could pick not to be picky, and surprisingly does, sometimes. Stanley is picky for his own amusement. Eddie is picky out of fear.

Fear of what? He would say he doesn't know. He would shrug and say, of what everyone should be: of not being in control. He would say his mother made him that way, and he wouldn't entirely resent the phrase *control freak*. He would say she is so controlling – for his sake, of course – that there simply came a time when he, for *her* sake, started handling himself the way she would. From the little to the big things. Each day more and more, until her old ticks and habits and reminders to not do this and please do that and always say good morning and kiss her goodbye became almost indistinguishable from his own.

Or at least that is what he would have said until two weeks before the end of summer vacation. More specifically Sunday night, after dinner. His mother had been watching some soap opera –the medical type, which never failed to make him squirmy –so he'd retreated to his room and texted Ben. Any topic of conversation between them was welcome, until they all came around to the same eventual, final stop: Beverly.

What made the topic unwelcome wasn't that it was repetitive. That was somewhat endearing of Ben, actually. It was that it made him feel alone. So, so alone. Not because he wished for somebody to crush

on (in fact, he dreaded it), but because it always made his friendship seem ... superficial. One sided. Fake. He could only listen to heartfelt thoughts and feelings, never share them. Even if he had them, he just *couldn't* share them.

He'd tried faking them, once, for Greta Bowie. She was blonde, and well dressed, and well-mannered in a way that somehow managed to also come out snobby. In short, someone he supposed it would be normal to like. Or Eddie-like to like. With the bonus advantage of her being unattainable enough he wouldn't be expected to do anything about it.

But it had only made him feel worse, sickly. It was easier with Stan, who was so reserved. For the time being, at least, because they didn't talk about it at all. He couldn't even begin to imagine how much harder it would be if he ever had to lie to Stan.

Beverly was also the final stop of conversation with Ben because it genuinely wasn't one Eddie could carry, and under the pretence of going to sleep, he let himself put in a little less effort that night. Except he hadn't been able to go to sleep. He'd stayed awake until all lights were off, and the only sound was the television set in his mother's room running infomercials. He'd gotten up, turned it off, and kissed her forehead when he felt her half wake at the sudden silence.

That simple thing had made him all the more anxious, but a little fearless.

Maybe it had been the absolute silence, or just the knowing that she wouldn't wake, that this brief window of time was his and *only* his, that'd driven him to spill it all out, somewhere. The Derry High Tumblr. He'd clicked send before knowing.

That was the moment he'd realised he wasn't afraid of not being in control. Not really. He was afraid of not being afraid. Of leaping, finding out just how truly brave he *could* be.

Which, he'd come to learn, was a little more each day. The first overwhelming dose of bravery had been sending the post at all. And it'd felt a little addictive. The second, answering to an e-mail he

received on the account he posted from.

It had been so unexpected that he had done it before he could argue himself out of it. Rationally it was a terrible idea. Reckless. Dangerous. It could leave him all sorts of exposed. But he'd done it anyway, and responding had become something he can now label as *Therapeutic*. Except, much like every other treatment, he tells himself this feat of bravery has to come in small doses.

The rules he set for himself are the following: He would absolutely, *never*, under *no* circumstances, *ever*, let himself forget the possibility that it could be a prank. Consequentially, he would *never* reveal *anything* that could *possibly* give him away. And lastly, he would *never* open or even log in on the account *anywhere* other than his laptop. There has to be a little fear in bravery, or else it isn't really bravery. It's called being stupid reckless.

So far, he's done an excellent job of following them. For the few weeks he and Tale have been corresponding, he hasn't even allowed himself to *think* about the e-mails at school. Call him paranoid, if you like. He believes if he does, if he lets them become a recurring thought, something will inevitably slip. What's worse, it may happen without him even realising. So he doesn't think about them, or Tale, or the fact that he could brush past him any second. Until spirit week comes and he does think about it.

It comes in the shape of a simple sentence: *I wonder if he likes his genre*.

First day of spirit week in Derry High is music genre themed. Each year votes for a music genre, and then everyone is supposed to come in some ridiculous outfit that somehow represents it. Junior year gets '90s Pop' and the next thing he adds is *if he's in my year, he probably does*. He had, after all, mentioned NSYC before he'd even introduced himself.

And catching himself having that thought as he's opening the door to his locker, and what's worse, *smiling* at it, makes him panic. With imaginary shaky hands, he neatly folds the thought and makes a point of putting it away for the rest of the day. The week. The year. Putting it away, period.

Even though it tries to slip away again, tug at him, he doesn't let it. Instead he returns his attention to getting to homeroom early, and indulging in the terribleness of the fashion Spirit Week produces. When he gets there even Stan, fellow particular Stan, has gel on his hair and an oversized jean jacket that he's certain is meant to make him resemble Justin Timberlake. It succeeds, as much as it can.

Ben is also wearing an oversized shirt and a backwards hat, trying his best to look like Donnie Wahlberg. Given he's the only reason Eddie knows who Donnie Wahlberg is, he finds no grounds to judge.

They both deflate slightly at the sight of him, who is dressed as no one in particular. He doesn't think 90's popstars should look any particular way, so he didn't try. He'd just worn overalls that seemed 90's enough since his mother had picked them, and she insisted on picking clothes she would've bought for him if he'd been a toddler *during* the nineties, and considered it done.

"No," says Stan flatly at the sight of him. "If *I* am doing this, you will *not* get off the hook so easily."

"Strongly seconded" adds Ben warmly, with the kind of smile that has endless potential to grow, as if already anticipating fun.

"So you propose I do *what*, shave to become Eminem?"

"Eminem's a *rapper*" responds Stan, matter-of-factly, "and no. But we *can* do something about the hair."

Fun's landing on Ben's face, as his smile widens. "Spike 'im up!"

"Oh, *no*."

"Oh yes," now Stan's smiling too, his scheming smile.

"No way! Hair gel's disgusting. And also, I'm pretty sure it's how dandruff spreads"

"Neither of us has *dandruff*" Stan's tone is fully amused now. What he means is 'I don't have dandruff', since he is already producing the gel and a comb from his backpack.

“Uh-uh” is all Eddie says in defence, tightening his lips and shaking his head. The thought he isn’t saying is, *I’ll look ridiculous, and if Tale sees me it can’t be that way*. He isn’t exactly thinking it, either. Not in those words at least.

“Uh-yes!” says Ben. “Come on, it’s not like you’ll be the only one doing it. That’s the point of this week. Nothing’s embarrassing because we’re all being embarrassing. Together”

Eddie has no argument against that. The word together, it disarms him. So he sits on the couch –gross couch, by the way. Comfortable, but disturbing if you consider potential fluids buried in there –and lets Stan comb and gel his hair into spikes. He lets himself believe it can’t be so bad, until he hears a snicker at the door. Surely enough, it comes from *Richie*.

Stanley shakes his head and chuckles along. “Hey, don’t criticise the look” says Ben, clearly in a playful spirit.

For some reason Richie takes that as granted permission to turn his snicker into full on laughter, adds “I wouldn’t dare!” and raises his arms, “I’m lookin’ pretty chuckalicious *mah-self* twirling once he manages to get a hold of himself.

“I should say” snaps Eddie, not a hint of a smile on him. He’s glaring. Because despite the deadpan seriousness of his tone, he couldn’t mean it less, and its infuriating. Its infuriating that Richie gets to laugh, because he is wearing just a stripped tank top and jeans and just enough gel on his hair that it looks oddly combed, but not stuffy. And it is *great*.

Even his glare is snappy, because he will not let himself stare at Richie. If he does it will linger, and he will inevitably smile, and, no. That’s another rule he’d established to himself, and strictly followed for quite some time now.

Ben and Stan easily shrug it off, and get to sitting on the couch and talking amongst themselves. Eddie lets the flush of anger simmer itself away, and joins their conversation shortly after. But self-consciousness has settled in, in the way he keeps his arms tight around his chest and doesn’t look up or away from Stan or Ben again.

It doesn't stem from the laugh, exactly. Because they *are* all embarrassing. It stems from how tempted he'd just been, to go back to the way things once were. It happened every time Richie left him an opening, and he pictured himself taking it. Then it would all stir inside him again, and he can't let that happen. Because then he *would* have to lie. Just considering it makes him feel like he's lying already.

It gets better as the classroom becomes more crowded, and one class gives way to the next. Before they know it its lunch, and it goes better as well. Bev is dressed as Britney Spears, with the pigtails and the pink sports top and white pants, so she inevitably bursts into 'Hit Me Baby One More Time' when Ben offers to get her lemonade refill for her. The entire table laughs, and Ben walks towards the fountain blushing so red Eddie imagines he could be radiating heat. He catches Bev's own gaze lingering on Ben, and can't keep himself from smiling. His smile shrinks shyly when Beverly catches his eye, and he quickly sinks his eye back into his plate before she can read someone else's secret on them.

By last period, what happened in the morning feels distant. Like the start of a headache right before bed, gone when you wake. Only he has last period with Richie. And when he walks in the classroom and walks by Eddie's seat he pats his head with the briefest of motions, and pretends to be spiked by it. Ever so dramatic. "*Dangerously* cool, Eds" he says. From the way he looks at him, expectant eyes and a lopsided smile, Eddie assumes it's some sort of apology. Hours late, and playful. Yet another opening.

"If you say so," he shrugs, closing it. "And don't call me Eds."

It seems today has left him no choice but to break a rule. The same one, twice. It's an unspoken one, to not even *think* about writing to Tale at school, so it should be okay to break. Because he needs to tell someone, to think someone would *understand*, how brave it can be to be a such a coward.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Here we go! I've figured out that I'll probably be able to work on updates only during weekends, see how much I can get done and see if I can get enough done



to post during the week as well. But we'll see! Hope you enjoyed and if you did comments and kudos mean everything to a starving writer with a dog to put through college. Thanks!

## 5. Chapter 5

### Summary for the Chapter:

Second E-Mail batch.

### Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, I should warn that while there's definitely not going to be any sexual content Richie's jokes are Richie's jokes and we hate him.

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: August 19, 7:22 PM  
SUBJECT: Spirit week haunts the hallways D:

Tale,

Hello. If you're reading this at a sensible time, keep going. If not, go to sleep.

I'm serious.

Okay. I trust you're well rested now. I'm starting to believe you may be secretly Asian or European, or live in your own time zone. Which means, we don't go to school together. Yay. But if we do, condolences. I saw quite a bit of butchering of your beloved NSYNC on behalf of the junior year today. Big yikes. This whole thing is big yikes, if you ask me. The concept is cool, I guess, but there's always that moment that has to make you feel weird about it. And the butchering of idols ... it's pretty brutal. Hope you could cope and that Book Character, Life on Mars and School Pride are kinder to you.

Davy.

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FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: August 20, 7:15 AM

SUBJECT: RE: Spirit week haunts the hallways D:

Davy,

Now you're making me highly suspicious that you could be an alien. No human is miserable during spirit week? Sounds to me like you're having an awful time, Davy boy. And I'm really sorry to hear it. There's lots of overenthusiastic people overdoing it, so I don't think I'm jeopardizing the secrecy of our extremely SEXY correspondence if I tell you I love it. What can I say? I'm a sucker for a chance to wear a super cheesy costume and not ride it alone all day, you know? I shouldn't need to tell you. You legally can't be against public displays of cheesiness if you use the phrase big yikes. BIGGER YIKES.

The only pointless day to me in this otherwise funtacious week is School Pride, because, what's the point of THAT theme? I get it, it's pride week... but that's straight up redundant. Just colors. A game. YAWN. The rest of the week, parade all day babey. All weird, all butchering. Speaking of butchering, I hope you wear something cheesy. GO FOR IT. Don't let anyone make it weird for you. Only me, and my sweet thoughts of your bootyass.

No, but seriously. Don't be glum, my chum. When in doubt, be slutty.

Tale.

---

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com

TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com

DATE: August 20, 8:06 PM

SUBJECT: RE: Spirit week haunts the hallways D:

Tale,

Maybe I *am* an alien, already wearing a costume all day every day, which means, I am under no legal obligation to be cheesy. And there's nothing wrong with saying big yikes. It's a very common phrase, or else would I, an alien, have picked it up? :P

I think school pride day might be the best day for me, now that you

mention it. Isn't it weird how people usually say they hate their school, and I mean *EVERYTHING* about it, but the second there's rivalry and colors involved everyone becomes the biggest fan? As someone who very proudly loves school and going to school, it always makes me happy to see it. The sense of community in it. I guess that's the feeling you get about everyone being in costume? I can see the appeal, when you think of it that way. And not just of staring at people's behinds. Or think about their behinds at all, you weirdo.

Davy.

P.S. I thought we were over the forbidden word. Don't throw slutty into the mix now. Can't let this get too sexy.

---

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com

TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com

DATE: August 20, 10: 38 PM

SUBJECT: RE: Spirit week haunts the hallways D:

Davy,

Can I call you Nerdy? That's a better name for you, if you, and I quote "proudly love school and going to school." Not to mention the Friday Nights Revelation. Unbelievable. I am rendered speechless. But yeah, that's what I mean. It's cool seeing people all jazzed up about the same thing and not shaming each other for it ... or not too bad.

I hate school pride at games, though. People are ANIMALS. In every way. As a school pride enthusiast I'm sure you know all about it. Hell, maybe you're one of the wild yourself. Good. Go NUTS.

Thank fuck this year the game's against Castle Rock High, and those guys suck serious ass. Victory assured!! Let's meet halfway and let you have the very cheesy obligation of buying a foam finger at the game. Enjoy yourself a lil'. Or a lil' more, you school pride BEAST.

Tale.

P.S. So you're FINALLY admitting to the adult nature of our electric mails? Spicy :9

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FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: August 21, 7:12 AM  
SUBJECT: RE: Spirit week haunts the hallways D:

Tale,

No, you absolutely cannot do that. Even though I'm about to say isn't going to help one bit. But, here it goes. Okay. I've actually never been to a football game. The closest I've gotten is watching All The Right Moves on a Friday night. And as you can imagine I didn't even watch it for the football aspect. I don't know. It just seems so crowded and loud and a little pointless. Can you even see what's happening on the field? And does anyone really understand it? Other than the people playing. You said it yourself, people can be literal animals at things like that. If you want to hang out, there's a thousand other better places to be. Just doesn't seem worth it. Not when you can also watch Varsity Blues.

Also, I don't think I'll be doing anything that could give you any pointers as to who I am. Sorry to disappoint you and all foam finger salesmen :(

Especially foam finger salesmen. I didn't even think they were a real thing in the year 2019.

Davy.

P.S. NO. And its electronic mail, not electric.

---

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: August 21, 7:41 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: Spirit week haunts the hallways D:

Davy,

WOW. JUST WOW. I'm seriously regretting everything I said because now you won't believe me when I tell you that you HAVE to go, and that you're REALLY missing out. Yeah people wild out and it gets crazy, but that's the whole point! You've never been to the zoo if you haven't seen the wild crowd react to the team missing a kick or a throw or whatever goes on down there. Who knows! All I know is it becomes total Animal Land. I saw Mr. Frinn throw his coffee on the ground. Literally. He just threw it. He was THAT MAD.

And the snacks are AMAZING. I don't trust your coke drinking taste buds, but you should trust my refined Pepsi Loving Tongue and believe me when I say there's no hot-dog like a football game hot-dog. Just thinking about them has me feeling some sorta way. Chomp chomp.

Also, I don't think you realize you've just provided me with 'has a crush on Tom Cruise and James Van Der Beek' blackmail material. You naïve being.

Humbly,

Tale.

P.S. Don't be silly, they're clearly electric from our SEXUAL TENSION

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FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com

TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com

DATE: August 22, 9:44 PM

SUBJECT: RE: Spirit week haunts the hallways D:

Tale,

Why would I ever trust a Pepsi drinker about anything he has to say, ever? Especially one that's threatening to blackmail me. That's just the type of deranged criminals you people are.

I know I established the 'no talking about friends' rule, and I don't mean to break it ... but you've made me curious about going. And for

girl related reasons (I know, I know) one of my friends is suddenly aching to go too. Which means we might all be going, in support. Or not. For Thursday night before the fact, it's still a little up in the air. Asking for permission to do something I don't usually do, in my house, can elicit a response as wild as throwing coffee on the ground. So, that's something. Either way, my curiosity has been sparked. I'm not sure if I'll actually get to go, but I hope you enjoy your snacks and eat a hot-dog in my honor. Maybe I'll eat one in yours.

Davy.

P.S. I won't dignify this with a response.

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FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: August 22, 10:03 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: Spirit week haunts the hallways D:

Davy,

Much to unpack here, not enough time if a certain grandpa keeps planning on nagging me about sleeping schedule. But I just have to say, eating a hot-dog for each other? My, How Positively Phallacious. And you say these aren't a sexually charged exchanges, you tease ;)

Most sexily,

Tale.

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FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: August 22, 10:05 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: Spirit week haunts the hallways D:

SHUT UP AND GET YOUR MIND OUT OF THE SEWER. I'LL NEVER EAT A HOT DOG AGAIN. AAAAAHHHH

**Notes for the Chapter:**

You know the drill baby grills, let me know if you enjoyed!



## 6. Chapter 6

### Summary for the Chapter:

The gang attends the Homecoming Game, and clues are misread.

Beverly makes them arrive *half an hour* before the game, which in theory sounds irrational, but turns out not to be. The stadium is already somewhat crowded, filled with bright lights and an unmatched energy. People brush past each other, holding plastic cups of all shapes and sizes for all possible drinks. The way adding the word ‘Homecoming’ before ‘Game’ radically changes people’s behaviour never ceases to amaze Richie. But who is he to judge. The very opposite. If anyone would appreciate people’s need for entertainment, it’s him.

He doesn’t seem to realize how hyperaware he is of everyone. Or rather, every *boy*. He knows he shouldn’t be. Because there’s no point in observing – Davy makes the point, e-mail after e-mail, of reminding him how much he doesn’t want to be discovered and won’t do anything to let himself be discovered. He could stare the night away, face by face, detail by detail, and find nothing. He knows.

He knows too that if he did, it would be a severe breach of code. A real no-go. He wouldn’t even be able to ask about it, in person or in writing. So there’s no point. *No point at all*, he reminds himself.

He’s leading Mike and Bev across the stand, so what he *should* do is look for seats, and quickly he eyes five empty ones. Bill’s bringing Georgie along, so that should do. “How’s about there, milady?” he nudges Beverly and points a couple rows above.

Her eyes narrow and she mouths *one, two, three, four, five*, then shakes her head. “We need eight.”

“Eight? What’s the occasion?”

No one brings their parents to these things. Not after freshman year.

“Stan, Ben and Eddie are sitting with us” Mike replies, picking up the pace and taking the lead. As if it should have been a given.

“Ah,” Richie raises his eyebrows briefly and nods. Stan, Ben and Eddie are sitting with them. That’s the most obvious response. Except it isn’t, because they hadn’t come to things like this together since freshman year, either. At least not the saving seats for each other kind of together. More the acknowledging each other if we happen to be nearby, or bump into each other, or casually cluster after some time kind of together, if at all. It shouldn’t take him aback, but it does.

“Ah?” asks Bev who would, of course, notice.

“It’ll be harder to find us eight seats, is all” he keeps walking up, and looks away from her. It’s a blessing and a curse, having a flair for the dramatic. More so when you can help it in situations that have no reason to be dramatic at all. They sit together at lunch every day. Why is this so odd to him, suddenly?

The find a miraculous ten empty seats somewhere decent. Mike rushes towards them, making a graceful leap Richie tries to replicate. He falls face forward, almost hitting the floor, and manages to recover at the last millisecond. Then a pose.

“Smooth,” snorts Mike, taking his seat.

“We can’t all be a miracle of movement, Michelangelo”

At this Bev laughs too, and pats the seat next to hers for him to take.

“Actually, Mr. Hanlon, Miss Marsh” he lifts one finger up, “best course of action would be to purchase our delicacies in advance. Or we’ll be left with the sloppy seconds. Care to safeguard my place? Many thanks” he courts in a butler like fashion, his voice sounding almost like Alfred Pennyworth but not quite.

“Only if you bring popcorn. And fries” lists Bev.

“And a Slurpee, *if you’d be so kind*” adds Mike.

“Of course, of course.” He extends his palm, bowing. Mike and Bev

place their coins and bills on them. “Sir, Madam” he courts again and scurries away.

Though he isn’t feeling particularly snacky this once, he doesn’t feel like sitting down yet. He tells himself he doesn’t know why, but he does. He hopes in the meantime Eddie will arrive –and he’s almost certain he’ll arrive with Stan – take a seat, have Stan between sit them and then he’ll only have to wave from a distance. His palms shouldn’t be getting sweaty. It’s stupid that they are.

He gets to the food concession stand, where the vendors who’ll be walking up and down and across aisles with those giant trays are setting them up. He makes a mental note of it, how annoying they are and how they interrupt your view and suchlike. Seems like the thing to workshop a good skit around. He toys with and polishes the thought while he waits in line. When it’s finally his turn to order, he’s stricken by a word. Or two, joined by a dash, however you consider it. Hot-Dog.

His stomach flips. Should he? He would, normally. Then he considers, he may have thought it pointless to look for any sort of hint ... yet the temptation to drop one overcomes him. He knows Davy doesn’t want to be found. But *if* Davy is here, would *he* look? And he ... Richie, Tale, whoever, does *he* want to be looked for? Looked *at*?

Maybe. Not? God. The girl at the counter tilts her head, her fingernails drumming away. He makes Bev’s order, and Mike’s, and gets extra sodas just in case. He pictures himself saying it, nonchalant. *And a hot-dog, please.* He pictures himself walking all the way back to his seat, carrying it on his tray. Then eating it.

And the answer comes to him in a snap. No, he doesn’t want to be looked *at*. Not yet. Not unless he thinks it’d be okay to look *for* as well, and deep down he doesn’t.

“And nachos” he blurts. So it won’t be a hot-dog, but he will eat something in Davy’s honour. So he can’t help it. And he can’t help grinning about it. Big freaking deal.

Ironically enough he heads back with a giant tray of his own, having to mutter the same ‘*excuse me*’s and ‘*thank you*’s and ‘*coming through!*’s

he'd been planning to mock. Only five minutes until the game is supposed to start, and only Ben has arrived.

"I come bearing junk and trash" he announces, surprising himself with how relieved he sounds. And the way he's grinning so easily he can *feel* his dimples. Bev and Mike grab their requests from the tray, and Richie is free to plop in his seat. Now he's next to Ben, which isn't as good as being next to Bev, but not too bad either.

Four minutes go by smoothly, with Ben animatedly telling them all something about how the goal posts are propped up when the stadium is built, until right before the fifth, Ben suddenly halts himself to shout. "Hey Eddie! Over here!"

On reflect he jerks his head in the direction Ben's looking at, and there he is. Wearing a beanie and a scarf and a heavy jacket on a barely windy night. He waves at them timidly, and rushes towards them before the crowd pushes him around. Richie almost doesn't realize he's waving back.

"Hi," Eddie smiles, "Sorry I'm late. Mom wouldn't let me leave without a jacket. And then without a scarf. And then without a hat. I had to run up and down the stairs about four times. And then park all the way back, because it's so crowded. And then I left my gloves in the car and realized halfway through the parking lot, so I had to go get them." he sighs, taking the Beanie off and setting his hair back in place. His breath is jaded. *It's cute.*

"Geez, take a breath, Spaghed" Richie hears himself say before he can hold his tongue back. Good god, why.

"Don't call me that" he says, much less coldly than Richie expected. Could he be holding back a smile? He is.

Mike laughs with his whole chest, and smile his brightest smile. "No worries, Eddie. You're just in time"

"Glad you made it, hi" says Bev.

And so both Richie and Eddie come to realise the seat next to Richie is the one to take. It would be too blunt, too obvious, too meaningful,

too *shot straight to the heart* not to take it. So he does.

“I haven’t missed anything then?” Eddie asks to no one in particular.

“Just the chance to make a snack order. I missed it too. But I’m sure the vendors won’t take long to start walking around” says Ben.

“I think I’m fine, thanks” responds Eddie, curling into his seat.

It only takes a few more seconds for the show to begin, and Richie’s grateful for that. There’s scattered chatter around them, but Eddie is watching the game intently. A couple minutes in, it’s Mike who shouts “Stan, Bill! Hiya!”

Stan, Bill and Georgie make their way up the stairs and to their seats. Georgie’s presence smooths the path for them, softening some of the annoyed looks they’d get otherwise.

“Why hello” Bev greets Georgie, who beams at her and waves at them all.

“S-Sit down, Georgie. We’re uh-uh-already late” Bill commands gently. Stan’s already taken the seat next to Eddie, and Bill sits Georgie between him and Stan.

“Hi” Stan half whispers half shouts, somehow trying to be polite and get to everyone at once.

Everyone waves.

“Thank God” Eddie says to Stan. “Do *you* know what’s going on down there?” he gestures at the field.

Stan snickers, and starts whispering lowly enough that Richie can’t eavesdrop. Another stupid feeling crawls all the way across his skin, the feeling he’s not right for it. He turns to Bev, but she and Ben are also whispering amongst themselves. Mike is completely focused on the game, leaning forward.

All he has are his nachos, and in them the comforting reminder that Davy *could* be here. He starts munching away at them. *One for you, one for me.* It becomes entertaining enough a game, and it develops

into going back to looking. He won't look for anything –*anyone* – in particular. He'll just look. At the way people have different smiles. Different laughs. Different frowns when they're focusing. Different ways to take a bit of their food. To slurp. To sit. For a small town, there are so many people he doesn't know. Davy could be anyone.

He's brought back into his own skin by the touch of someone else's against his hand in the nachos. Eddie's. Eddie seems as surprised by it as Richie is.

"Sorry. Movie theatre reflex" Eddie apologises, promptly retreating his hand.

"No problem" Richie means it.

He remembers Sonia Kaspbrak, and her belief that American cheese is made of nothing but plastic and chemicals and that the butter in popcorn can block your arteries and the cold of a Slurpee give you a headache, all ironic when compared to her habit of buying all of it supersized and reluctantly allowing Eddie to have a single fistful of each food and a two second sip of each drink. Ridiculous woman.

"You can have more than one, if you want" he adds, meaning it just as much. *Fuck her.*

"Okay. Thanks" Eddie smiles at him so sincerely Richie has to look away almost instantly. Eddie is grateful for it, and puts all his focus back into the game as well. He is certain Richie remembered the time Sonia went with them to the movies, and listed her rules to the both of them. He shouldn't be so touched by it. He is.

Stan guides him through the rest of the game, and he has to admit it can be quite exciting. Several plays in he can recognize when to cheer and when to boo and when to clap, and gets a little carried in the mob hysteria of it. They all do. His eyes meet Richie's a few times, and they smile at each other in a way they hadn't in quite some time. They split the nachos too, though Richie doesn't mention it again.

A vendor walks near them, and he *has* to fight the impulse to buy a hot-dog.

He hopes Tale has no expectation of him actually buying a hot-dog, and isn't looking at everyone who buys one. Only a part of him hopes the opposite, and that's the part he has to fight. He fights by telling it they look oily and the origin of the sausages is dubious at best. Then he thinks of a dirty connotation for the word sausage, and has to double his battling efforts against a sheepish smile. A little high on bravery, he shouts "Excuse me!"

But the flame snuffs out as soon as he hears "Yes, what can I get you?"

Small doses. He can't risk it so boldly.

"Nachos, please" he answers.

The vendor puts down the enormous tray, and produces them. They're a little soggy than the ones he and Richie have almost finished, and he almost instantly realises he doesn't want them. He pays for them anyway, and turns to Richie, lifting the plate as to offer him one. "It's only fair" he explains.

"Awe, you're such a gentleman" Richie takes one and shoves it in his mouth, chewing loudly. He grins and looks him in the eye the entire time. Eddie only rolls his eyes and looks away, or else he's certain he will blush. And he will blush so red Ben's heat radiating red will seem bleak.

"That he is" says Stanley smiling at him and leaning across him to grab a nacho as well.

"A pluh-plate of those for us too" Bill tells the vendor.

"Sure thing", and the exact same motion happens again.

"Y-You can share with us, Stan", he offers. Stan looks hesitant.

"Y-You *should*, or else Guh-Georgie will eat them all" he adds, teasing the younger boy who shakes his head in his seat.

"For the health of the youths, I can make an effort" Stan smiles at Georgie, and leans to the other side. Georgie snickers.

“And a h-huh hot-dog for me.”

Eddie freezes. He *won't* read into it. Statistically speaking, more boys in his class are bound to eat a hot-dog than they are to not. Bill fits easily into that statistic. *Do not read into it.*

“Can't come here and not have one, can you, Big Bill?” Richie asks, “*Scrrrrumptious!*” he adds in a Tony Tiger voice.

Georgie laughs even harder, and Stan chuckles slightly too, shaking his head.

“If th-that's your way to puh-puh-plead for a bite, forget it, Tozier” Bill states, but not too harshly. Smiling, he takes the first bite.

And Eddie cannot *not* read into it. *Can't come here and not have one?*

Statistically speaking, more boys in his class are bound to eat a hot-dog than they are to not. Bill fits easily into that statistic. Statistically speaking, more boys in his class are bound to eat a hot-dog than they are to not. Bill fits easily into that statistic. Statistically speaking, more boys in his class are bound to eat a hot-dog than they are to not. Bill fits easily into that statistic. Statistically speaking, more boys in his class are bound to eat a hot-dog than they are to not. Bill fits easily into that statistic. Statistically speaking, more boys in his class are bound to eat a hot-dog than they are to not. Bill fits easily into that statistic.

Statistically speaking, more boys in his class are bound to eat a hot-dog than they are to not. Bill fits easily into that statistic. Then why can't he stop stealing glances at him?

The game ends. Bill cheers loudly at Derry High's win.

*Victory assured!!*

All the way back to his car, Eddie does everything he can to not think about it. Not read into it.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

The plot thickens at last. We're finally getting to it chickadees. As always kudos and comments are much much appreciated.



## 7. Chapter 7

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: August 24, 11:45 AM  
SUBJECT: Thinking about your HOT-DOG ;)

Davy,

I write to you as yesterday I saw many a delicious hot-dog and couldn't stop thinking about yours. Just making sure you took the time to think of mine, WINK WINK. Just kidding noooo don't block me you're so sexy haha. OK, getting serious now ... I really did think of you during the game. Like, every time that nuance we call food salesmen passed by with hot-dogs I thought of you, and if maybe you were there. I hope you were, 'cause thinking you could be there going ANIMALISTIC was pretty much the only thing that made the game entertaining for me. Well that and the ladies shaking their pom-poms, you know me.

[illegible]

Tale.

✿✿

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: August 24, 3:17 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: Thinking about your HOT-DOG ;)

Tale,

Don't be disgusting, you're making me regret actually having thought about you when I saw hot-dogs, too. Because I did. And obviously I did go. Yay! I have a nay, though. I hope it's not unfair since I was the one who said we shouldn't be looking for each other, but I feel like I should disclose that I did. Well, I didn't deliberately try to *look* for you, but every time someone around me got a hot-dog I just noticed. And it made me feel a little excited (I can't find any better word to use so don't be disgusting about it or I swear I'll block you). I'm sorry the sports talk bored you so badly. I didn't exactly get it either, but starting to get some of it was fun enough.

If it's of any consolation, not fun enough that I see myself turning into a jock anytime soon. I think just typing the word made me puke on my mouth a little. Okay, that's unfair. Only football jocks make me want to throw up. I'm 99.9% you're not one, but if you are ... I'm dissing you too. And maybe you were right, there's a special something in the snacks there. I'm guessing sanitary violations. Makes sense you would like it, Pepsi drinker.

Davy.

\*\*\*\*\*

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: August 24, 5:03 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: Thinking about your HOT-DOG ;)

Davy,

Why my good sir, if I'd known all it took to get you excited about me was some sausage I would've mentioned hot-dogs a lot sooner. Don't you jock off to hard thinking about me. As fellow sportsmen we need our good arms. :D

Tale.

1. (L).S (READ THIS): I'm jizzed you actually came ;). OK I'M DONE. Jazzed. I'm jazzed you actually had fun. And yes, it's probably the magic of unwashed hands that makes everything

taste so good in there. You heard about the peanut bowls in bars? That times ten.

\*\*\*

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: August 25, 9:57 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: Thinking about your HOT-DOG ;)

Davy,

Your silence on how many different variations of the same joke I can come up with is deafening. It's praise o'clock!!

Tale.

\*\*\*

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: August 26, 4:22 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: Thinking about your HOT-DOG ;)

WAIT ... DID YOU ACTUALLY BLOCK ME???????

\*\*\*

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: August 26, 8:48 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: Thinking about your HOT-DOG ;)

Pls say sike ....

\*\*\*

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: August 27, 6:54 AM  
SUBJECT: RE: Thinking about your HOT-DOG ;)

I SAID WHOEVER BLOCKED ME YOUR MOM'S A HOE

\*\*\*

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: August 27, 7:33 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: Thinking about your HOT-DOG ;)

To think I was reconsidering ....

\*\*\*

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: August 27, 7:35 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: Thinking about your HOT-DOG ;)

NO WAIT BABY COME BACK  
(now read that as baby got back ... if you laughed you're legally  
obliged 2 respond :D )

\*\*\*

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: August 27, 8:02 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: Thinking about your HOT-DOG ;)

Whenever you're ready to take this seriously again ... I'm waiting ...

\*\*\*

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: August 27, 8: 10 PM  
SUBJECT: My dearest most darling

My dearest most darling esteemed Sir Mr. Davy Jones,

Hi.

Sincerely,

Monsieur Or-Tale, at your service.

\*\*\*

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: August 27, 8:13 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: My dearest most darling

I'm so close to deleting this account I swear.  
(I'm not. Just learn to write like a normal human being?)

\*\*\*

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: August 27, 8:13 PM  
SUBJECT: Dinnertime

Davy,

Sincerest apologies. I was just making sure you aren't actually an alien. Bad joke. Obviously you're not so ... anything you want to share with the class? Promise I'll stop making this weird. Just tell me anything. We had paella for dinner so that was cool. It's a hit or miss sometimes with my mom, but this was a hit. Is it lame to ask what's your favorite food?

I'll be so good I won't even suggest it's sausage.

Tale.

\*\*\*

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: August 27, 8:50 PM  
SUBJECT: RE : Dinnertime

Tale,

Were you hacked? If so, thank you for hacking. You're an improvement. If not, I'll let the sausage slip in just this once. Yes I wrote that on purpose. No, you cannot comment on it. This is your final test.

As for my dinner ... picture your mom's greatest miss, then multiply it by ten. Add tofu. It was something a little worse than that. I'm not exaggerating when I say I love school. Cafeteria food is a safe, cold pizza filled haven from time to time. That's just how bad ma's cooking is since she discovered the so called ketogenic diet for herself and put me on something similar but, quote, fit for a growing young man, unquote. I wish you could understand the irony in this. I love her, but she can be a bit much. And much terrifying, too. I could tell you what my favorite food is, but it can only be consumed at a specific restaurant that will remain confidential. Second best thing? Dipping French fries in McDonald's ice-cream. I know everyone does it, but that doesn't make it any less ground breaking. Yours?

Hungrily,

Davy.

\*\*\*

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com

TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com

DATE: August 28, 7:02 PM

SUBJECT: RE : Dinnertime

Davy,

I can see who you've inherited your cruelty from. Hungrily? You're just begging me to flirt with you. But now *I'll* be the one denying those privileges. 'cause I don't flirt with school loving nerds, you nerd. And not EVERYONE does the french fries on ice-cream ... why, could this possibly be your first slip? Don't worry, it's still popular enough a thing you won't trip on that banana peel. Mine's easily by far bubble-gum ice-cream, as I have a very refined palate. Look at us, eating like kindergarteners and discussing the same things they do!

What's your favorite color? And will you be my new best friend?

Tale.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

asderf I'm probably gonna have to add more parts to this because they keep discussing nonsense and I can't control them ! as per usual please drop your comments and or/kudos if you enjoyed. i promise progress WILL be made soon. also i'm trying to do a fair distribution of the povs, but we'll see we'll see

## 8. Chapter 8

### Summary for the Chapter:

Most of the losers are in drama club together, and Richie's not so sure of how to feel about it when the time to pick this year's school musical comes.

Richie is used to Bill taking the lead in *everything* , or most everything. He could honestly say it has – *had* never bothered him. It has always seemed the natural way of things. An indescribable, unspoken fact. When someone had to be turned to, they turned to Bill. He's The Guy. And Richie couldn't mind it less. He loves that about Bill, as a matter of fact. Always had. Until he raises his hand during drama club. Then Richie feels an *irk*.

It's an irrational *irk*, and he knows it. For the first weeks of the club meetings, where it had all been fun and getting to know you exercises and do weird stuff with your elbow this and jump up and down focusing on your fingernail that's, Richie even forgot Bill was in the room. But suddenly he feels invaded. He knows it's stupid, because Bill is still sitting quietly in the back of the stage, and his arm isn't even fully stretched. It's a bent, tentative, *out-of-its-comfort-zone* arm. But the fact that it's up at all, in *Richie* 's comfort zone, unsettles him.

The stage had been *his* place for so long, his and Bev's, that suddenly the idea of sharing it with Bill, *Big Bill* , makes him uneasy. For a brief moment his nose twitches. *It's stupid* . It's *Bill* . And he's looking at him for the confidence to even speak. He makes himself tug up a smile.

"Wh-What about Duh-Duh-Damn Yankees?" is what he asks. They're discussing this year's production. Or rather, deciding on it. Everyone grows quiet for a few seconds. Maybe to take in the suggestion, maybe at the surprise of hearing him talk. Publicly so. He forgets Bill has that effect, how it can take people aback when they're not used to it.

"No. I still think we should do West Side Story" Greta Bowie states, in



a voice that clearly means *and because I said it, that's law* .

“Right, because that would be so original. Oh wait, it would be, if we had a blonde Maria. Because you would just *have* to be Maria, wouldn't you, Greta?” intervenes Beverly, ever so bold in the way she holds her chin up with the perkier grin.

“I would, actually, and it'd be *provocative* ” Greta begins, stabbing Beverly with her stare, before Mrs. Albright interrupts with a brusque: “No bickering for roles before we even choose a play.”

Bev quietly mimics Greta at Richie, and he snorts.

“Do you have thoughts to share, Mr. Tozier?” Mrs. Albright cuts him off.

“I think Damn Yankees would be *Damn Cool*,” he responds for the sake of responding quickly, and finds himself meaning it. Bill gives him a warm smile, the ‘thanks for having my back’ kind. Richie returns his very own ‘it's nothing’ toothy one. The stupid feeling settles in, deeply. And he's decided he won't mind it. If Bill happens to be great at this, so be it. He'll be glad for him. Cheer up him, buttercup.

It's the natural course of things. Who is he to disagree with it?

“It *might* . Now, back to an organized consensus, please. Let's stick to the plays we have actual permission, scripts, and music sheets for this year, shall we? The Music Man, Ragtime, and Damn Yankees. Hands up for Music Man.”

It's mostly freshmen with no sense of cliché who raise their hands. Mrs. Albright counts them.

“Ragtime?”

A few scattered arms go up.

“Damn Yankees?”

The most arms raise, and Richie's not surprised. His is, loyally, up high. So are Bev's, and Ben's and Eddie's. He'd almost forgotten they

were there too. They all smile at Bill, who gratefully smiles back. The irk prickles back. It's the way Eddie smiles at Bill, so warm and sincere and wide, as if the credit and responsibility for Damn Yankees rested solely on his shoulders, that does it. It's his fourth grade smile. The smile that Bill coming up with a new version of Hopscotch or a new Yo-Yo trick lured out of Eddie. Awed and wide and lit. And Richie hadn't minded it so, in fourth grade. He'd smiled a similar one, oh so impressed. He wants more than anything to not feel this irk. Against Bill, of all people. Has he mentioned how *stupid* it is?

"Damn Yankees it is" announces Mrs. Albright, not without a hint of surprise. Yes, *that's Big Bill's impact for ya*. "I'll have the script photocopied for you tomorrow, so we can do a read through and begin *considering* cast. Tech crew, be here too so you can start picking your brains for set design. Dismissed!" She flares, playfully waving her hands to scatter them away.

They're all up on their feet quickly, and Richie immediately gravitates towards Bev. Bill does too, of course. *Of course*. It's almost annoying, how obvious straight people get to be. And dense at the same time. Add that to his list of Bill related annoyances for the day. *Mah-gaw*. He's makes a mental note to tell Davy about it. Or rather, to *whine* to him about it. And have him eloquently whine back. He has to hold back an anticipatory grin. One of the advantages of Davy's reluctance to share any big, daily things is Richie gets to rant about the tiny, guilty little things. Things he would never dare complain about if he had to call Bill by name. It's hypocritical, he's well aware, but we all need to be every now and then.

There are still a few minutes left before the extracurricular period is officially over, and even longer before the late buses depart. Richie and Bev exchange a wordless glance with a very simple message: '*Want a smoke?*' '*Fuck yes*'.

He starts making his way to the back of the auditorium, only for Bev to stand still in place, and Bill to stand frozen mid step. Waiting. *Waving*, at Ben and Eddie. The pair exchanges a look Richie tries and fails to decipher, but ultimately makes their way towards them.

Richie has to wonder why as they stand outside in awkward silence. Bev produces a cigarette, and lights it gracefully. She belongs in the

back of a theatre, he thinks. All glamour, with her flaming her and her effortless je-ne-sais-quoi. Ben, Bill and Eddie stare at her, *awed* . Maybe it's just him, who finds this silence agonizingly awkward, because that je-ne-sais-quoi does nothing to him. Or not in the same way, at least. Oddly and ironically enough, he's the one Beverly stares back at, offering him a cigarette from her pack. He takes it, and she lights it for him, her complicit smile shining bright again. He's certain they all wished they smoked right there and then, so they could be in his place. *The irony* .

Maybe Beverly senses it too, because extends the pack to everyone else, one by one. Ben and Bill politely decline, Ben blushing so red traffic lights are put to shame, but Eddie straight up scrunches his nose and shakes his head a bit manically. "I'd like to still be able to breathe when I'm forty-five, thanks" he says, half play half scorn.

"You mean you *can* breathe now , *Mr* - " Richie can't help feigning to take a deep breath from an invisible inhaler.

"No, I *can't* " Eddie frowns, "and I shouldn't be doing anything to make it worse."

"Really? Looks like you're breathing just fine to me" he leans over and blows smoke directly on Eddie's face.

Eddie fake coughs dramatically and swats the smoke away, "I'm *serious* ."

"Dead serious, you mean" He says, taking a long drag. Unable to help himself, he leans in much closer, inches away from Eddie's face and deliberately exhales the smoke from his long, long drag. "Or soon to be"

" *Stop* " Eddie keeps swatting the smoke away.

" *And* we're back in middle school" says Bev with a quiet laugh and a shake of her head.

"I'm not" Eddie snaps, jerking his arm back in place " *he* just never outgrew it".

That strikes a nerve. A nerve that is always twitching, regardless of

how badly Richie tries to ignore it. The nerve that aches in reminder, in possibility, that Eddie had deliberately stepped aside. That the distance between them hadn't *just* happened, unintentionally and little by little. But Eddie had sought it out, gently. If the ache of the thought shows, its only for a mere second, before he drags his goofy grin right back out.

"Out of us I'd say *I'm* the one who did the growing, little Eds Spagheds" he retorts quickly, almost thoughtlessly. And he ruffles Eddie's hair, before laying his elbow atop Eddie's head and leaning in, taking yet another long drag.

They all roll their eyes and smile. Eddie rolls his eyes too, but doesn't flinch away. "*Okay* " is all he says, flatly.

Silence reigns again, more awkward. Then Eddie props Richie's elbow away, and takes a subtle step away. So subtle no one else seems to notice it.

"But hey. Damn Yankees. That's pretty cool" Ben breaks the silence with a timid smile.

"I duh-don't know it th-that well, but fruh-from the title I can tell it suh-sounds fun" Bill smiles back at him, and Ben immediately perks up. That Big Bill effect again.

"It is " Eddie beams, smiling so brightly at Bill the irk tugs at Richie again. Alright, not tugs . *Jerks* . "My mom's made me watch the movie around a thousand times. I'm glad it got picked. Even if I'm not up on stage, I'm sure she'll be really excited to see it."

"Course she will be. She'll be coming to see *me* " Richie grins, pulling back. "Or should I say cu—"

"Don't you *dare* finish that sentence"

" *Anyway* ," Beverly interjects, all too familiar with the old routine to let them go through it again, "the lack of female roles in it is *alarming* . That's my one complaint. Greta will be *beyond* cutthroat"

"I'm sure you could play anyone much better than her, Bev" Ben reassures her.

“Tuh-totally. Duh-don’t sweat it.”

“Oh, I *know* . I just worry about the big deal she’ll make of it. If she understudies me, I might get killed” she grins, but Richie knows the concern behind the joke is real. Maybe she won’t get killed, but definitely harassed. It wouldn’t be the first time, with Greta Bowie. Richie wonders sometimes, what it’s like for Bev. Only hen in the rooster house. If she’s with them because she *wants* to, or because she soon ran out of options and made the best of what she had. He smothers the thought before it has a chance to haunt him.

“Nonsense, *mi* lady. We wouldn’t let her harm a hair on your cute head, *Bevvy* girl” he puts his arm around her, pronouncing *Bevvy* like *baby* .

“Wh-what Rich said” Bill nods.

“Absolutely” Eddie nods as well.

“We’ll trip her up on stage, if she tries. Or blind her. We have that kind of power” Ben adds, smiling so fondly it’s not difficult to believe he might.

“Thanks guys” She says sincerely, leaning closer against Richie. They’ve chosen each other, and *that’s that* . He’s overcome with an overwhelming need to tell them. To just *spit it out* . They’ve chosen each other, and it’s in moments like this that he thinks they would *never* shut him out. *No matter what* . Even if the what feels so heavy, so massive, and so hugely, *embarrassingly* important, as he glances at Eddie, that he can’t breathe from the weight of it. He takes another drag of cigarette, and presses it in. *Some other time* , he thinks, every time. *A better time* . A time where it doesn’t feel like the revelation could crush it all.

*Crushing* , the very root of the problem.

They all stand still in solemn silence, only interrupted by the beeping of Eddie’s digital wristwatch.

It shouldn’t annoy Richie so much that he’s wearing one in two thousand nineteen, but it does. In the best way. He thinks of

mentioning it to Davy, then the specificity of it dawns on him. *Only Eddie Kaspbrak* . And while he doesn't think his Eddie Situation is obvious to the straight eye, if he even mentions any hint of Eddie to a trained gay eye he's certain he'll put two and two together instantly. It's daunting, thinking how he's one close look away from being *seen* .

"Shoot, I have to go" Eddie announces, quickly lifting his backpack, "Stan's driving me."

He's halfway down the steps when Richie has the *brilliant* idea to say, "Aw, there goes our little virgin who can't drive."

Bill snorts, and Ben does too, even if significantly quieter. Beverly slaps Richie in the chest, but she's smiling widely too. Without turning around, Eddie flips him off. And everything is great for a moment.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I know we're mostly getting pining content from Richie but believe me Eddie's time to pine will come soon! Also, I'd love to hear if you'd like longer chapters that combine e-mails with scenes and switch POVs. It'd mean less frequent updates but longer? If you're reading first a) thank you and b) let me know?

## 9. Chapter 9

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: September 9, 7:43 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: WELCOME TO PREESCHOOL

Tale,

As much as I wish I could be surprised to hear your most treasured secret possession is a joke book, I'm not? It seemed obvious as soon as I read it. You try your best to be funny, and I sincerely wish that you succeed sometime soon :D Kidding. Actually, you make me grin a lot, which must be really difficult to accomplish just with writing, but you do it. I don't know why I'm admitting to that and I'll deny it if you ever ask again. Please keep practicing until it's a thing people won't find shameful to admit.

As for mine? Funny, it's a notebook too, of sorts. It's silly and not as obvious as your thing, but it's a sketchbook. Warning: not as promising as it may sound. I'm not very good at drawing, and I carry it around mostly to draw maps. Before you say anything, I know it's weird. That's why it's secret. Only one of my close friends has ever seen it, and because we happened to run into each other when I was working on it. I've had the habit to have one for a few years now. I used them mostly as a child, especially during breaks, when my friends were busy with family plans or out of town or grounded. I liked to wander outside, aimlessly, and map my route.

I still like to sometimes, hence the current notebook still being in progress, but my friends are less busy now that we're old enough to make our own plans together, and I am too I guess. Still, it's fun. I find it very relaxing, and it doesn't matter how many times I walk the same streets and paths, the maps always come out a little different. A little better, can I humbly say? I don't know. It may be a small town but there are always new things to notice. For instance, we noticed each other. That came out cheesy.

My turn for a question: guilty pleasure songs that you dance to alone in your room? I know you're shameless, but there *has* to be

something. Mine is all of Taylor Swift. Yes. All eras. *Shut up*, she's incredible. It's *manly*.

Davy.

\*\*\*

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: September 10, 8:03 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: WELCOME TO PREESCHOOL

Davy,

Look at you, a little explorer. Is Davy masculine for Dora? ADORABLE. Almost as adorable as your fangirling over me. I told you, my craft is both exhausting and effortless. You have to be *born* funny, and then refine it. It's a full time job. And no, I won't stop bringing it now or ever. You love me and find me hilarious. This is factual both to me and the FBI agent inevitably reading our e-mails. Hi Mark.

Also, Taylor Swift? I wish I could shame you for it, and I WILL at some point, but it just feels perfect for you. That's my cheesy contribution of the day. You're right, I *am* shameless. And I've never had bad taste in music, ever. So there's no answer to this question. There's nothing I would dance to alone at three am in my underwear that I wouldn't dance to in a tux at prom. Learn from me, and request a T-Swift song. This means of course I am legally forbidden to answer, because then you'll see me dancing to some iconic pop anthem at prom and inevitably know it's me. MAYBE it will be What Makes You Beautiful. Maybe not. Harry Styles is hot, whatever. Mark knows my playlist.

Okay, now me: stupidest fear you have. Can't be anything serious or depressing. Like, I used to be, I shit you not, deathly afraid of Big Bird. I would scream and cry. I wasn't very popular in kindergarten, all the crying at parties. To this day that tall abomination still gives me the heebie-jeebies. I've got my crying under control, but I'm doomed for life. I threw up once on a plate of Cheese and Mac because some guy in a mascot suit showed up out of nowhere. My



mom tells that story at least once a year. I will never escape it. Perks of our lifestyle: no children or wife will ever force me to sit down and watch him haunt me every morning all over again, or hire creepy mascots. When I'm orphaned I will finally live it down.

See you next time, Adios!

Tale.

\*\*\*

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: September 11, 7:43 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: WELCOME TO PREESCHOOL

Tale,

Call me adorable again and I'll make a picture of Big Bird my signature. This is a full on *threat*. And you won't believe mine, you worst nightmare of mine: getting thrown up on and starting a vomit chain until everyone drowns. It sounds irrational, I know, but it also goes all the way back to Gymboree, where it apparently came true. Some kid threw up during snack time, and then everyone started throwing up and that was the day I was pulled out of Gymboree and all schooling until further notice. All under the claim that I could've caught something, which makes perfect sense to me. But I used to have nightmares about it, just a sea of disgustingness and my being unable to stop contributing to it. I'm getting goose-bumps just thinking about it. When you think about it, throwing-up is a real danger. Because throw-up makes you want to throw-up. An endless cause and consequence cycle.

Desperately needed change of topic, my question. You made me relive a severe trauma so I get to ask something profound. Here it goes. What made you want to start writing to me? And keep trying to, when I wouldn't respond? I mean, I know what made me write the first post: despair. That's as clearly as I can put it. A deep feeling that if I just didn't express how I felt, *why* I felt that way, what I *am*, somehow, *somewhere*, arrhythmia would kill me. And I guess it was curiosity that made me write back. It was a very big deal for me, if

I'm honest. I was terrified you were trying to prank me, or find my IP address, or hack me, or just try to do something to figure out who I am and expose me just for the fun of it. That seems stupid now, and I feel I should apologize for it. That's a serious fear, I suppose. Why did *you* write?

Davy.

P.S. Was that a Dora the Explorer reference? Seriously? I hate you.

\*\*\*

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: September 13, 11:49 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: WELCOME TO PREESCHOOL

Davy,

We're getting real, I see. Okay. I think I should start by saying you don't have to apologize for thinking that. Honestly, you're so much braver than me. I wouldn't have ever made the post, let alone reply to some weirdo e-mailing me about it. Takes some serious guts, and you have them. Really. And I wrote to you for the same reason, kind of? Just out of need to say it to someone. And it felt safe to say it to someone who felt the same way, but could write about it much better. And just had the, and I can't address this enough, balls to post about it somewhere everyone could see. Can't believe you made me realize it and then say it, fanboy of mine, but I think I actually did it just because I admired the hell out of you right there and then. And I had to let you know, somehow. Cheer you on. When you wrote back I couldn't believe it because ... I wouldn't have. I would've let fear of all the things you said paralyze me. You didn't, and that's amazing. Seriously.

Since we've established we are in no way trying to out or prank each other, should we get a little braver? Getting your e-mails is, no joke, the best part of my day. And I'd like to talk to you more. And get your replies faster, too. Totes clingy but I admit it. Not to mention, having to write more than twenty words is agonizing to me. If you think I'm funny by e-mails, wait until you see my grammatically

criminal but otherwise wonderfully hilarious texts. So, what say you we exchange numbers? Please?

Tale.

P.S. I'll make your contact photo Dora. You'll make mine Boots. You'll love it.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

HMMMMMMMMMMMMMM

## 10. Chapter 10

### Summary for the Chapter:

One slip up from Richie jeopardizes everything.

### Notes for the Chapter:

#### IMPORTANT!

I'm introducing Henry Bowers in this chapter, so consider this a warning for the language he uses and homophobic behavior he displays in canon, which won't be different in this fic. Only downplayed a LITTLE bit. If you feel uncomfortable reading that content I will put a small summary of the events at the end of the chapter, so you can scroll and read that as to not miss anything. Thank you so much to everyone who has shown interest in this fic. You make me excited to keep working on it and post my updates as soon as I'm done with them. I'm so genuinely flattered and excited.

As soon as Richie clicked send, he found himself regretting it. It set him up for an agonizing weekend.

He barely slept on Friday, waiting for a response. He kept drifting in and out of sleep, only to wake up in a jolt and check his phone. Nothing, of course. It didn't have to mean anything. Davy was a sleep schedule freak, he knew that.

He spent most of Saturday morning in his room, opening and closing his e-mail tab. Meals, during which his parents insisted nobody was allowed to as much as *glance* at their phones (it's precious family time!), seemed painstakingly long. They ran errands and made plans for the next day. A next day Richie could hardly bring himself to care or worry about. It dawned on him Davy had to reply *today*. Or tomorrow would be *much worse*.

Minutes ticked away into hours. He told himself it was best to put his phone away and do – or think, at least - about *anything* else. Best if it

was something he'd actually like to put some focus into, so he set to the task of reviewing his Damn Yankees script and start brainstorming ideas for his portrayal of one Mr. Applegate.

He would have to watch the movie at some point, he realized, and it sounded like a fine and welcome distraction. Then it occurred to him it might put a tamper on his own *creativity* for the role. The thought came to him in Mrs. Albright's voice, and he agreed with it. Oh well, it could be more fun to watch it after the fact. With the whole gang, even. Then he'd get gloating rights about how he'd done it *just right*, or *much better*, depending on how different it turned out.

Almost telepathically sensing his need to be entertained, Bill texted to invite him to the movies. The disappointment he felt when he heard the *ping!* and looked at the notification caught him by surprise. He cared about Davy, yes, and he was nervous he would respond 'no', but for God's sake, he had to *keep it together*.

He told himself not to overthink it. He told himself it took a couple days for them to get back to each other, sometimes. He considered Davy having siblings, which could complicate him having enough privacy to reply. He considered weekend plans and he considered family outings in remote places with no Wi-Fi. He considered Davy's laptop malfunctioning and having parents that supervised his phone. From what he'd learned about him, he most likely did. He considered just about every possibility that could keep him from considering the one that nagged at him: having scared Davy away for good. That he wouldn't respond at all. Ever.

More out of need than real disposition, he agreed to go out. Thankfully, only Beverly, Mike and Bill were there to meet him. He truly wasn't in the mood to cope with seeing the first polite rejection of his life, named Edward Kaspbrak, on top of the crippling fear of being about to face the second.

He sat down, lights went out. The movie began. And he realized it, just like that. Being cut out by Davy would hurt as deeply as being cut out by Eddie had. A specific hurt. The realization should've been more of an impact. A big freak out moment. A big, *'Oh no, maybe I actually like the boy I've been jokingly flirting with for weeks even though we've never even met in person and probably never will and all I know*

*about him are randomly weird secret facts'.*

He had to scratch the word 'maybe' out of the thought instantly. I wasn't a maybe. It was a *definitely*. Blame it on Davy's super adorable weird secret facts. Look at him, two seconds into the epiphany and already throwing the words super adorable around. Super. Adorable. Talk about having a type.

He didn't know how to feel about the fact that he wasn't panicking or jumping straight into denial, and he didn't want to ponder on it yet. He probably wouldn't even have to, if Davy never replied.

The movie ended, the room lit up again. As he had to grin and joke his way out and back home, he reasoned with himself. Davy not replying wouldn't be the *worst* thing. It might even be a good thing, that they wouldn't exchange numbers or keep talking or grow so close not knowing who he is would become intolerable. It would save him a lot of trouble, for sure. And from an early, manageable stage.

Putting it under that perspective worked to make his Sunday somewhat bearable. By mid-afternoon he'd convinced himself Davy wouldn't reply. If he did, it would be to say 'no, and we should stop talking before you get any more ideas. Goodbye'. He'd considered it over and done.

Then along came Monday, and school with it. Three steps inside and that conviction crumbled. He didn't know what it was about the crowded hallway that dissolved it. The certainty that Davy was walking it too? The possibility that any face he walked past could be *his*? Or just the hard smack of routine and reality, reminding him Davy had become an ingrained part of his, a part he wasn't ready to let go of yet. Didn't want to.

He wanted to talk to him, about his day and himself and his thoughts in that bizarre, rule filled way of theirs that forced them to talk about the small things in big ways. The rare things. The important ones. And it didn't matter if Davy didn't want to text, or ever show his face. All that mattered was that he wrote at all.

The wait for his reply was excruciating. Every second at school, with his phone burning his pocket, seemed eternal.

Somehow the afternoon was worse, because during the afternoon Davy *could* reply. He just *wouldn't*.

Tuesday was even worse, and it took every ounce of him to keep it all inward. To not scream. To not rant. To not straight up walk out of class and run to the nearest electronic device to check his e-mail. To not stand up in the cafeteria during lunch and yell 'DAVY WHOEVER YOU ARE YOU DON'T HAVE TO SAY ANYTHING. PRETEND I NEVER ASKED FOR YOUR NUMBER. WHATEVER. JUST WRITE BACK.'

He figured he really must be a thespian prodigy, because no one seemed to notice how on edge he felt. Was. Beverly nudged his elbow a few times during Biology, since he wouldn't stop noisily bouncing it up and down in the middle of the lesson, but that was all the acknowledgement his desperation got. He didn't know if he was relieved or all the lonelier for it.

Wednesday, nothing. Davy hadn't gone so long without replying since he'd made that string of hot-dog related innuendos. And then he'd been sure Davy was only playing along, in his own stuffy way. This?

Thursday, he couldn't bear it anymore. In the middle of study period, he yielded to the urge and walked out of the classroom to go to the Library. It wasn't so irrational, he told himself, since going to the Library during study period wasn't an absolute madman move. Maybe an un-Richie one, but nothing anyone should find too noticeable.

He took a deep breath and looked around before plopping down in front of one of the school computers. He made sure the place was practically empty and that the monitor of his computer was in no one's line of sight before logging in. He was shaking. *Nothing*.

All he wanted to do was run to the bathroom, lay on the filthy floor, and cry. Instead he opened another tab, and did actual research for his History project. The bell rang, he closed the tabs, got up, and left.

Somewhere in those few seconds a big, *big* mistake was made. It was such a small, mindless, adrenaline induced mistake that having made it doesn't begin to occur to him when he sees Henry Bowers standing

next to his car at the end of the day. The parking lot is almost empty by then, and he's parked all the way back. There's *no one*. Just him, Henry Bowers, and his car.

He doesn't realize the specific mistake or even thinks he made one (later, in retrospective he knows he should've), but panic creeps up on him regardless, in a sudden, electrified jolt of energy. The way his spine straightens and every hair on his body spikes up at the sight of Henry Bowers is pure, cat-like instinct. Bowers is waiting patiently, tortuously staring at him right in the eye. Grinning in delighted anticipation. A toothy, vicious grin, with his lips twitched and tilted slightly to the left.

Correction, Richie's no cat. He's the canary. And it's evident to both of them that Henry is the cat about to eat him.

"Richie *fucking* Tozier" is all Henry says, thrilled.

Richie can only bring himself to keep walking, ignoring him. He fixes his stare on the concrete floor, every muscle of his body tense with fear. It's been a couple years since Bowers last gave him a wedgie or kicked the air out of his stomach, yet muscle memory overdrives him. Not just muscle memory, he thinks, *every* memory. He fidgets in his pockets for his car keys, clicks twice, and the car *beeps* as the locks open.

"Not even hello back. Is that any way to treat an old friend, huh?" Henry insists calmly, not moving an inch.

Richie stays silent. He takes the last few steps, and just as he's about to reach for the door handle, Henry takes the final step to put himself between Richie and any chance of escape. Richie's forced to look up into Henry's sharp angled, manic face. Looks like two years without a close up have been unkind to him. His face is full of acne combined with acne scars. Its oily, blackheads clogging his nose. His hair crisp and unwashed. *He deserves it, this fucker.*

"I *said*, is this any way to treat your old friend?" Henry repeats, his unchanged wedgie-pulling-self beginning to show.

Richie swallows. "We're not *friends*."



"That's where you're wrong, *pixie boy*" Henry leans closer, grinning madly, "you're talking to your new best friend."

"Fuck. Off. Bowers" his mouth snaps before his brain can do anything about it. He flinches away instantly, shutting his eyes closed. And his instinct proves right, as Bowers slams his fist against the door. *BANG*. Then he takes a deep breath and chuckles.

"You wouldn't want that. Believe me. What you *want* to do is invite me inside your car. *Now*" Bowers hisses.

Richie gulps, frozen.

"*Now*" he shrieks, and before Richie can think or say or do much else, Henry steps aside and heads for the passenger door. They both get in at the same time, slamming their doors shut.

"Why, thank you" Henry says once inside, immediately lifting his feet and resting them on the dashboard. "I just want to have a civilized chat. Think you can handle it without peeing your pants?"

The strangeness of it all has Richie in a dazed, tongue tied knot. All he can bring himself to do is nod. Jesus, he might actually pee his pants if no one pinches him awake in the next ten minutes. Five.

"Good, good" Henry pats his head with the force of a smack. Surely intentional. "I just want to tell you about a *queer* little thing I say today." And he giggles. Yes, giggles. It's horrifying. An unstoppable giggle fit that belongs to a possessed doll in the cheapest, tackiest horror movie. Richie wouldn't be surprised if Henry suddenly shifted into something else, and then he actually jolted awake. Any second now.

Henry gets a hold of himself, and pats his stomach, having a grand old time. "Sorry, sorry. I just" he wipes a tear from his eye. Richie has never been more tense or confused or horrified in his life. "Ah, I can't explain without losing it. It's better if you just watch" Henry says, and he lifts slightly from the seat to pull his phone out of his back pocket. He fiddles with it for a second, before putting it up, out of reach but the screen visible.

It's a picture of Richie's back, leaving the Library. Richie stares at it, confused, his glasses at the very brink of his nose. Bowers flicks to the next picture.

Richie doesn't even have to read it to know what he's looking at. It's screenshots of his account. Of *that* account. He can actually feel whatever colour was left flush out of his cheeks. His heart pounds. His hands sweat and tremble. All at once. Bowers slides to the next picture. And the next. And another after that, until Richie can't bring himself to look anymore. He's sure he'll throw up.

"Looks like someone forgot to click the log out button. You know what they say about *fags*. Not very bright, are you?"

Henry snorts and snickers like the absolute pig he is. Richie wishes he could say something, do something, anything, but his heart keeps thudding and his ears are drumming and it all keeps happening at once. He's going to be sick in his car and on Henry Bowers. That's a fact.

"You know; I've been saying it for *years*. Years, man. Years putting up with the fairy dust you have falling out of your ass. You *fucking fag*" and finally he's speaking venomously, savouring every insult and every word. His eyes glint like its Christmas morning, and he's holding himself back from giggling all the way down to the Christmas tree. It's revolting.

"And nobody would take me seriously. I mean, I" he can barely keep talking, from holding back a laugh. "And now I get to tell everyone. About you and your little fuck-buddy Davy, whoever the fuck he may be. HA." He breaks into another nightmare laughing fit, slamming his fists against the seat. It's an asylum worthy scene. "It's just ... it's just too grand."

Richie remains frozen in his seat. What *can* he do? Deny it? Beg? Sob? Try to pick a fight? Start the car and run both of them into a wall? The latter seems like his only option. Nothing else he says or does would stop Henry Bowers now, and he knows it. He's maniacal, for fuck's sake.

Oh Davy. Oh Davy you were *so* right. You weren't paranoid at all,

Davy. And Richie is so grateful Davy was smart enough to conceal himself so thoroughly. He's so sorry, so sorry he slipped so stupidly. This would've never happened to Davy. Of course not. He's so careful and so scared and he'd *trusted* him. He'd trusted him and all Richie had gone and done was deliver them to Henry Bowers' claws. Nicely with a bow on top.

"Just thought I'd give you a heads up" Henry adds triumphantly. He's the type that would keep trying for some sort of reaction, but isn't stone, paralyzed silence reaction enough from *Richie Tozier*?

"Even if don't know what I want to do with your little Nancy love letters yet. Have them read in the morning announcements? Paste copies on everyone's lockers? I mean, they're just golden. I could do *anything* with them."

There's a beat of tense silence. Whatever it is Bowers keeps expecting, Richie doesn't give it to him. He's spending all his energy on not giving him the satisfaction of seeing him cry.

"*Unless...*" Bowers adds.

Richie refuses to look up. To turn around. To open his mouth. He just refuses. The rational side of him keeps screaming unless what? Unless what? Ask him unless what! But he just can't bring himself to. His stomach is burning up with ache and bile and he's cramped up in horror. He can't.

"Unless, you pass the school year for me." He spits out, finally, and stares at Richie expectantly. He's shifted back into his even more unsettling state of calm.

"*What?*" it comes out so quiet he could barely hear it himself.

"*Wh-what?*" Bowers mimics, "don't play coy with me, sissy pants. I know your dumb, mole-rat face is just that. You make straight A's. You're in advanced Math."

It's not the proposal that Richie doesn't understand, it's the relation between one thing and the other. One monumental, life altering fact against freaking *Algebra*? That cannot possibly be the only thing

Bowers wants. It would be too easy, too convenient, too ... it would be no guarantee. It would be the first of *many* things. Wouldn't it? He would have to say yes to one thing after the other. He would be giving Henry Bowers power over him forever. Or, at the very least, the rest of their lives on Derry. The very thought strikes him as revolting. *No way.*

Except, yes way. Because horrid as it would be, it would be a way to stall. It'd give him time to get himself together. Come out. Then it wouldn't matter. If grades are what Henry Bowers wants, he would have to make good on his word until the end of the year, minimum. And that seems like time enough. Time enough to find a way to tell Davy, too, and get him out of this mess. *If he replies.*

"That's what you want? For me to do your fucking *homework*?" He *has* to ask.

"*Duh.* And make sure I pass *every* exam" Bowers perks up, satisfied.

"I can do that" Richie musters quietly.

"You better. For your new *best pal*" Bowers says with a wink, giving him a slap on the back and scurrying out of the car. The way he said *best pal* makes Richie squirm. His hands are still trembling.

It isn't until a few seconds after Bowers is out of sight that Richie feels he can breathe again. And after the first deep breath comes a big, quiet sob. Another and another. He might choke. He wishes he would.

He cannot believe how in just a few days he managed to royally screw *everything* up.

## Notes for the Chapter:

### SUMMARY:

Eddie didn't respond to the e-mail in almost a week, so in his desperation Richie panicked and opened the e-mail account at a school computer. Bowers found it, and now he's blackmailing him.

My poor Richie ... his week hasn't been very cash

money. But this is just beginning, buttercups.

## 11. Chapter 11

Eddie was unsure of what to make of the request at first. Or rather, *about* it. The wary part of him that insisted he should always, always consider the possibility that the e-mails were nothing but a joke, bait, kept nagging at him. Sounding *remarkably* like his mother, he couldn't help noting. It'd quieted down to whispers, and begun to sound a little ridiculous, yet it never subdued. And he felt ashamed of it.

Tale asked nosy questions and reeled hook, line and sinker time after time, yes. However, he also gave nosy, whimsical answers without a tinge of concealment or hesitation in them. If they were lies, they were too particular and intricate. At times it seemed to him that if this was a prank, the person on the other end knew *exactly* who they were pranking, and crafted every response accordingly. Witty and funny and effortless. Everything Eddie wished to be. He wanted them to be truths. He wanted to let himself be tempted by the request, and give in.

He'd clicked *respond*. Typed in 'Tale,' ...and promptly closed the tab. Then meticulously turned off his laptop, set it on his desk, and sat at the edge of the bed.

It wasn't the sort of decision he could make in three minutes. Not in three hours. Possibly not even three days. Because there weren't only two possibilities to consider (Tale being a genuine stranger and Tale being a genuine joke), there was a third. Tale being someone he *knew*. Who knew *him*. Not in passing, not just by face. Truly knew him. To state it bluntly: Bill. Ever since Homecoming he hadn't been able to dismiss the thought, not entirely.

It was a bittersweet, complex possibility. With insurmountable implications. The first and most latent one, that they *already had* each other's numbers. If Bill *was* Tale, their identities would be revealed in a matter of seconds. The sharpest double edged sword he'd ever come across. Because he would *like* to know, if Bill *was* Tale. It would be comforting, and –despite the silliness of it, he couldn't help thinking – storybook like. Old friends reintroducing themselves under a new light. It wouldn't be as frightening as revealing himself, along with

everything he'd shared, to a complete stranger. The true matter was, he didn't feel prepared to reveal himself at all. It would undoubtedly either change or end the correspondence altogether, and he'd been surprised to find how much he didn't want that.

But wasn't it too late for things *not* to change, either way? Denying Tale of that progress could also put a tamper on their already complicated friendship. It could make Tale feel unwanted, or not trusted. The most frustrating aspect of it all was that the only person he could discuss this particular predicament was Tale himself. The only person he *wanted* to discuss this particular predicament with was Tale himself. He could almost see the words in his head, Tale telling him not to be a chicken about it. CLUCK in all caps. Then Eddie would explain everything that mortified him about the prospect of exchanging numbers. They'd land on a sensible resolution, somehow. The yes or the no would be by *mutual* agreement.

Alas, no such luck. He'd been left to reason by himself, and make the decision for them both.

He slept uneasily on Friday, and Saturday morning the first thing he did was sit at his desk with a blank piece of paper. Two columns, yes and no. He began filling them by writing every reason he already had on each side. He left out Bill's name, of course, and most details, in case his mother snooped. He wrote heartily and at length. Once it was done he folded it, saved it neatly inside his desk drawer, and decided he would come back to it later. He would read it, add and scrape as many times as necessary until the answer became clear. Yes, that was a sensible, rational way to decide.

He went about his Saturday the usual way, then. His mother liked to go to the farmer's market, have lunch, and head home for a quiet afternoon. It was enjoyable, for the most part. Only she noticed, as she would, that he was quiet. *Quieter than usual, Eddie-bear. Are you feeling all right?*

He explained that he had quite a lot of thinking to do, in terms of Damn Yankees. She was still on the fence of him participating in such a thing (props can fall from all directions on you, Eddie-bear), yet it seemed the choice of play and the reassurance that Mrs. Albright and Ben were involved every step of the way eased her into it. She loved

Ben, as all teachers did. She offered to watch the film with him when they got home. It would be a somewhat pointless exercise, he said to her, since how it all works on stage is very different to how it works in a movie, and she proudly pinched his cheeks. *All his show-business talk, such a little star.* One good thing: it seemed the fence had been crossed in his favour.

Stan invited him birdwatching early the next morning, and Eddie was thrilled to agree. They met by the Lighthouse around seven. It was foggy and damp, but they were both dressed for it. The sky was still tinged with a light pink, which Eddie always loved to see. It was one of the main reasons he hardly said no to birdwatching with Stan, despite the hours. The views were always pleasant. Lovely, even. *It's the kind of thing I'd like to tell you about*, he thought. In which column would that go?

They sat in quiet concentration. Stan on birdwatching, Eddie on his list. For a moment he let himself picture it. Bill sitting next to them as well. Stuttering Bill. Big Bill. Who always had to have a hot-dog at the game, according to Richie. Who apparently made sausage penis jokes when the stutter was cast aside. Jokes that frankly sounded more like Richie than Bill.

But who is not to say Richie's humour hadn't quietly rubbed off on him. Or that Bill was being, on e-mail and under a pseudonym Eddie had yet to make sense of, the way he wanted to be face to face. And he could see why Bill would want to come off a bit more like Richie: unbearably, annoyingly, impossibly hard to dislike. Eddie chuckled quietly. Yes, he supposed that was an approach it made sense to try. He had to stop himself short at the thought. No, he was tangling it all up. He could *not* keep assuming Bill was Tale. That was unfair to them both. And he could not bring Richie into the equation. That was unfair to all.

He was back home at ten for breakfast, and as soon as he went upstairs he added to the 'Yes' column: *If B isn't T, I have to be able to rule him out.* Then, to the 'No' column: *I should not be ruling people in or out.*

He ended Sunday with both columns at the same length.



Monday was unceremonious. He and Ben exchanged all their Damn Yankees related ideas, and even began sketching. More accurately, Eddie sat by him awed and gaped as Ben explained and sketched away his intricate ideas, with a vocabulary and resolve that left Eddie with no grounds to question them. Or to question that Ben knew exactly what he was talking about, and that he could and would make it happen. It made him genuinely proud, and he couldn't stop praising and nudging his arm. Ben flustered every time. Stan was lost in conversation whenever he joined them, but unquestioningly joined in the praise and made them promise to hide a couple plastic birds in the set for him. He even listed specific species. Said it would be something to entertain him the many times he would inevitably end up watching it.

Tuesday was more so similar. Eddie grew a little quieter by the hour. He felt time was slipping by too quickly, and his mind was working deliberately slowly. Tale had written *four days* ago, and he'd made no progress on his response. He told himself it was better than to press it and write something that turned out off putting, but it was a struggle to convince himself of it. With his luck by the time he found an adequate response Tale could've moved on entirely. But his e-mails were the best parts of Tale's day, he'd written. Surely he was putting too much pressure on himself. The answer would come when it did.

It didn't come on Wednesday, either.

By Thursday, he couldn't bring himself to think of anything else. He was almost convinced he'd grown a stress induced ulcer. Every lesson was white noise. There was only one sentence on his mind, which he was hoping would telepathically broadcast to its intended recipient: *I don't know yet. Don't be mad.*

It broadcasted with particular focus on one person during lunch. A person named Bill, who sat next to Mike, who was animatedly catching him up on everything he'd missed during basketball practices so far to be in the musical. Bill seemed to participate in the conversation absent-mindedly. Could they be, *were* they lost in the same thought? The more Eddie fought the idea, the louder it became.

Friday morning Eddie arrives to French early. It's customary. Bill arrives minutes later, and sits nearby. They exchange hellos. 'You

seemed quiet during lunch yesterday', Eddie wants to say.

What for? The conversation isn't going to somehow lead to 'Why yes, Eddie, I was. It's because my pen pal who strictly forbids I talk about him hasn't written back to me for days. And he's so important to me it's clearly taking a toll. I'm telling you because even though you've given me no clue whatsoever to sense you might be him, you are, and that means you're entitled to know.' So he doesn't. He just gives him a quiet smile. He *has* to write back. *Tonight*. That's that. He's resolved on writing, and on not stressing about what he will write. He tells himself once he sits down to do it, he'll know. Admittedly, he's a little curious to find out the outcome himself.

He can't stop staring at the clock, every room he's in. It's ticking away slowly, and he just wants it to point to *four*. Every time the bell rings, it feels like a milestone. Only his sentence grows much longer when minutes, precious minutes before the bell rings to announce the end of lunch, Mike says: "We should all go bowling tonight."

"Yes" Stan gushes with uncharacteristic excitement. Eddie feels a strange wave of affection for him. Stan had always liked bowling, and come think about it, he probably hadn't in years. Not with them at least.

"You mean *fuck* yes" agrees Richie, much louder, slamming his hand on the table.

"Fuck *fuck* yes!" chants along Beverly, also slamming her fist. Mike laughs.

"Sounds fun, yeah!" Ben says, wholesomely. The subtle yet established divide between them has never appeared more natural to Eddie. But with Ben and Stan joining the plans, he knows his chances of eluding them to go to his computer instead have gone from slim to none.

"Oh-Only if I can bring Guh-Georgie. I'm suh-suh-supposed to babysit him tonight," Bill states.

"The more the merrier" says Mike, and no one disagrees.

“I’ll have to text my mom” Eddie adds. Usually he would be embarrassed by that fact, and he is, slightly. Only this time her strictness strikes him as a veritable excuse.

“I’ll call her for ya. We all know she can’t say no to *me*” Richie beams, only to incite a collective: “Shut Up, Richie”.

The entire table laughs. And it feels nice, to travel in time briefly. To when this was the way of things all day, every day. Before Richie’s beaming caused a knot in Eddie’s stomach, and he had to take a step back. And before he considers Tale again, as Bill. Such a revelation could shatter the picture into a thousand pieces. If not shatter it, permanently distort it, in some way.

They all head back to their respective classes. Stan and Eddie sit together in Economics. It isn’t the greatest bargain, since Stan is intensely focused and Eddie can never seem to grasp what could be so fascinating about it, but he figures its better than sitting through it alone. Before they go their separate ways for the next period, Stan gently reminds him, “Text her”.

So Eddie does, the usual paragraph. It explains precisely where he would be going, what time he estimates he’d be home, and exactly who he would be going with. The use of ‘would’ and not ‘will’ is of the utmost importance. So his mother wouldn’t feel he’s already made the decision *without* her. Eddie finds it exaggerate, but understandable. Now more than ever. One person decisions are enormous, and tortuous.

It seems pointless to keep staring at the clock. All he can stare now is his phone, hoping it will ring, and that it will be his mother telling him to come *straight home*. It never does. It doesn’t even ping with a text response. The end of the day bell rings, and he finds himself cornered in his locker by Ben and Stan.

“What’d she say?” asks Ben. No need to clarify on who *she* is.

“She hasn’t responded yet.”

“I asked my mom to call her, she shouldn’t say no.” Stan insists.

She may try her best to hide it, but it's clear to Eddie Mrs. Uris isn't very keen on his mom. He could see it in the little frowns and glances she threw, and still throws, occasionally. He began noticing them since Elementary School, when Mrs. Uris would extend sleepover invitations, or return all children to their homes with Burger King crowns on their heads, only to be judgementally scowled at at best, fully lectured at worst. It always made Eddie shrink, cheeks red. She is, however, very fond of Eddie himself, which he assumes to be the main reason she endures it, and continues to be pleasant enough to his mom for her to approve of both her and Stan.

"Thanks," says Eddie, meaning it. "I'll try calling her, then."

He reaches for his phone. Ben and Stan know to take a respectful step aside. It's an unspoken agreement. Who Eddie has to be to his mom isn't the person he's proudest to parade in front of his friends. There had been endless teasing about cheek kissing and his obligatory *'I love you, mommy's* when they were much younger. They made a spectacle of it. But now that they all suffer from similar Embarrassing Parents Syndrome, no one finds it funny, and they give him privacy. That's very much a perk of adolescence for Eddie.

She picks up immediately and grants him permission, not without a lengthy reminder about the latent risk of Athlete's Foot if he is to borrow shoes worn by hundreds of strangers.

"I love you too", he hangs up.

"So?" Ben steps back in again.

"So, yes" Eddie smiles.

"Everyone say *thank you Mrs. Uris*" Stan adds proudly.

"Duh-Don't let R-Richie hear you say that, or he'll make it gruh-gruh-gross" Bill joins the circle, backpack hanging from his shoulder, smiling.

"*What's dat oi 'ear? Wan Billiam Denbrough usin' me name tae spread infamy? Eh?*" Richie exclaims in an Irish accent, remarkably no longer terrible. He slings his arm around Bill, in a gesture that is half hug

half wrestle. Eddie feels a jolt of *longing*. Not being able to clearly distinguish who he feels it for unsettles him. Never has he wanted to go home and away so desperately.

“To keep *you* from *spreading* infamy, more like” replies Stan, his demurer smile gleaming.

“*Infamy? Never. Oi'm an'-onest an'-onorable lad, me*” he puts his hand on his chest, solemnly.

“Not the Irish bit. Cease and *desist, mister!* You’ll make my ears bleed” Beverly arrives, draping herself over both Richie and Bill, as if she were going to faint. The way she says it is reminiscent of a fifties movie damsel. Or is it just New-Yorker? Eddie can’t really tell.

He figures these are accents and bits she and Richie have endlessly practiced together. He can almost imagine them, sitting on a carpet floor somewhere, out-acting one another, laughing. Almost the way he’s seen them do in drama club, but with no tension. No pressure. It strikes him as intimate, close. A picture to add to the list of moments he’ll never be a part of. Moments he’s willingly missed.

In the sudden, inexplicable, annoyance of the moment, he brings his hand his ear and cups it. Then examines it. “I think mine already are.”

Everyone bursts into laughter, and he finds himself chuckling. He’s thankful it didn’t come out spiteful, or mean spirited. Because it *hadn’t* been.

“Huh-hear that, Richie? Eddie guh-gets off a good one!” Bill exclaims. The laughter amplifies. It’s painfully obvious to Eddie, then. Richie’s humour is rubbing off on Bill. Alarmingly so. His nervous ulcer might rise up to a hernia.

“Ah, I see how it is. Using my own weapons against me. Getting your chucks off your chuckle-bunny” still grinning ear to ear, Richie pats his hand against his chest as he says the last ‘your’.

“I do *not* want to know why Richie just referred to himself as chuckle-bunny. As a matter of fact, I never wanted to know anything

less” Mike announces himself, and stands next to Stan. “What I *want* to know is, who’s ready for some bowling?”

They all cheer and set more concrete plans. Only the plans turn out *slightly* askew. Eddie had assumed Stan would drive him and Ben, but suddenly its decided Beverly’s driving Ben and Mike. Bill insists on driving alone since he needs to pick up Georgie. That leaves Richie in Stan’s car. They decide to meet at the alley in an hour and a half, giving everyone time to pick up little brothers and drop off unused schoolbags and cars.

Their walk across the parking lot is unusually quiet, considering Richie Tozier is walking along. Eddie and Stan look at each other, wordlessly. They don’t need to speak to understand each other, and the thought that’s been made perfectly clear to them: Richie must be feeling like the odd man out. And be, surprisingly, aware of it. The recent years of distance stretch between them.

“You’re awfully quiet. Cat got your tongue, Richard?” Stan asks, warmly.

“Nah” he responds, instantly perking up, “just practicing quiet, seeing as I’m riding a jalopy with two *grandpas* tonight. Nothing but silence and apple juice in the Asylum-mobile”

“Quiet. My car is a *classic*” Stan retorts, nudging Richie with his elbow.

They all know he means it. It’d been Stan’s father’s first car, saved up momentarily for his child. From father to son. Stan had quietly and endearingly bragged about it upon reception. Its emotional value took away any importance from how rusty and impractical a car it truly is. How Eddie had envied it. More than he would any expensive sports model. With good natured envy, but envy nonetheless.

“Of course, of course. How could I forget. A multigenerational *treasure*, cherished and cared for by Stan The Man. My misnomer” Richie responds, “it’s obviously the *Bird*-mobile. CAW CAW” Richie calls, flapping his arms.

“Try to disrespect my car *or* birds again and you’re banned” says Stan

firmly. “also, you’re wrong. It is, evidently, the *Stan-mobile*.”

The three of them all laugh. Yes, Stan’s father’s middle name is also Stan.

They make it to Richie’s unkempt, not so greater car, and agree to reconvene at his house. The part of the drive that only involves Stan is smooth, with quiet music and chatter. Once Richie hops inside it becomes more chaotic. There’s rock, mild yelling, and seat kicking. Eddie keeps count of a total six times Stan threatens to kick him out. He only means it twice.

Thanks to Stan’s pristine driving skills and Eddie’s equally excellent directions, they’re the first to arrive.

The last time Eddie had been bowling he was twelve. It’d been for Stan’s twelfth birthday, and the place amazes him almost as much as it had then. It remains exactly as he remembers. There’s pop music playing on the speakers, and the neon lights make it all look different. Magical and futuristic at once. Even their faces do, he notices, as Richie flashes him a greenish, glowing smile. Their skin is purple. The most changed thing is the admission price, which has gone up three dollars. They give Stan their bills and pennies.

They keep walking, and there is a lot more for Eddie to notice. The first time he’d been so caught up in the childish excitement of it all that there were a thousand things he missed. He may have also missed them because his mother believed he was going to a picnic in the park and listed to him the precautions for *that*, not a bowling alley. This time she’d given him the right list. As they make it to the counter he can’t help his thoughts, and recounts it.

The dirt that could be hidden by the odd lighting. The possible spills of soda and sauce and maybe even spit and sweat that could be lurking in the carpet, concealed. A carpet he’ll have to touch with his socks when changing shoes. The athlete’s foot in the shoes. Putting his feet in those over worn shoes. His fingers in the three dotted holes in the balls that countless people could’ve, *had*, stuck theirs in. Not to mention they’re heavy and he has no practice whatsoever. They could snap his fingers in half, if he lets go incorrectly. Without realizing it he pants, standing frozen in place.

“Eds,” Richie snaps him out of it. “Eds, shoe-size.”

“Um, nine and a half” he blurts out to Stan. A pause, then he turns to Richie. “And don’t call me that.”

“What? Shoe-size?” Richie grins, his head tilt up.

“You *know* what” Eddie sighs.

Stan collects the shoes for all three of them, and hands their two pairs to Richie.

“I do. Just have to drive you a little mad” Richie says, adding a tint of warmth and sympathy to his smile –and a pat on the back, when he gives Eddie his shoes.

Eddie *has* to modestly smile back, and immediately look away, down at his feet. His panicked thoughts must’ve been written all over his face to elicit such a gesture out of Richie, and he feels so *embarrassed* by them. He changes his shoes as quickly as he can, and makes a point not to act squirmy about it.

Once they’re wearing the right shoes they’re shown to a table and lane. The employee shows them how to put their names on the screen using a keyboard set in front of the table, and points them to the snack menu as well. Stan explains they’re still waiting for a significant half of the party. The employee nods, recites his name and the descriptions of the people they’re waiting for back to Stan, and leaves.

As expected, Stan takes the affair quite seriously, a perfect ‘STANLEY U.’ being the first name to appear on screen.

Richie quickly pushes him aside. He’s already giggling to himself. Stan and Richie exchange an anticipatory look. Seconds later ‘LONG DICK’ pops up on screen.

“Classy” Stan says, scoffing.

“You can’t leave that. Kids come here” Eddie adds, meaning it. He makes for the keyboard, seeing as it’s his turn to type his own name, and Richie predictably won’t change his himself. The entire affair is



so annoyingly Richie.

“That I am and that I will, you *perverts*,” Richie leans against the keyboard protectively. “Dick is *short* for Richard. *I’m* Richard, thus, *Long Dick*” he’s too delighted, too proud.

“Care to explain that to every parent that walks in here?” Eddie presses.

“If I have to,” Richie shrugs, manoeuvring the keyboard as far away from Eddie as possible.

“Whatever. Let me put my name in,” says Eddie. Richie shakes his head and jerks the keyboard further away. A struggle begins.

Stan is already sitting down, failing to fight the urge to roll his eyes all the way back into his skull. Eddie and Richie look like children. Toddlers, physically fighting for the keyboard. *Kids come here indeed*, he thinks.

Beverly, Mike and Ben arrive, and they all exchange a knowing look with Stan. Particularly Mike. Stan raises a finger on his lips. “Enter quietly,” he greets them, “don’t disturb the wildlife.”

Bev snickers, and Ben laughs quietly, shaking his head. The fact that Eddie and Richie continue their wrestling, taking no notice, makes it all the funnier.

“Just let me write!” Eddie insists.

“I’ll write it for you!” Richie whines playfully.

The laughing from the rest of the group grows louder, and Eddie finally takes notice. Their collective stare on him, on him *and* Richie, standing so close together, practically tangled, awakens a painful self-awareness in him. The laughter makes it all the worse. The being stared at, laughed at over his closeness with Richie (even if it’s just the *physical* closeness they’re aware of. Not the other closeness, everything Eddie had once felt –still did, at times) made it echo too much like a nightmare scene.

“*Fine*” he huffs, jerking away instantly and slumping into his seat.

Everyone smiles at him, blissfully light. Stan points out the 'LONG DICK.' Perfectly timed, 'SPAGHETTI HEAD' appears.

Richie turns back briefly, wearing an ear to ear grin. "Ta-da," he says, "Like it?"

They all erupt into laughter once again. Except Eddie. Eddie refuses to react in any way, give out anything more than a sarcastic: "Ha-ha. There's a joke you've *never* made before."

"You know what they say. If it ain't broke, don't fix it" Richie responds nonchalantly. "Who's next?"

Richie never steps off the keyboard, the screen ending up with the ridiculous list: BEAVERLY, MIKEGRAINE (because Richie's sure Mike will be *painfully* good at this), BENJI T.H. (T.H. stands for *The Human*).

While waiting for Bill, they order snacks and drinks for the table. Eddie is both amused and disappointed the place only serves Pepsi products. Disappointed on his behalf, amused on Tale's. He probably likes it here. He would. It's bright and colourful in an usual way that takes some adjusting to. Very much like him. It peeks out again, the idea that Tale *does* like here. And will arrive, any minute now, with his brother. Or maybe not, because Bill's not him. The hernia is pulsing.

As if invoked by the thought Bill arrives, seconds later, with Georgie. He gives Richie a scornful look the second Georgie reads the words LONG DICK. Richie kindly reminds him Bill was already making a frequent and generous use of the word dick, both in its written and spoken form, when *he* was twelve. It leaves Bill without any grounds to argue. Richie lets Georgie pick his and Bill's screen names, which is how they end up with DOLLAR BILL\$ and MR. PRESIDENT, for George Washington.

The rest of the evening flies by. Plates of fries and mini pizzas come and go. Eddie is thrilled to not only not break his fingers, but rediscover he is surprisingly good at bowling. It's in the simplicity of tracing a straight path in his mind and getting the ball to follow it. Ben is extremely skilled to, and they soon become an unstoppable

duo. Mike turns out disastrous, and his screen name doesn't allow for him to live it down.

Though an unremarkable bowler, Bill is an *incredible* big brother, and Eddie is touched by it. Whenever he steals glances at Bill, he is either making Georgie laugh or dutifully giving him advice. He cheers Georgie on at every turn, and the way he teases him is never malicious. It's everything Eddie would've wanted to have in an older brother, or to be to a younger one.

And it dawns on him, how much harder keeping secrets must -could, *could* be to someone you are so close with. Someone who looks up to you entirely. Who you being humiliated or hated or harassed would doubtlessly harm. Maybe his mother is difficult, and the prospect of coming out to her isn't in any way appealing, but at least Eddie can rest assured of something: he wouldn't have to protect *her* from what people thought of him. It was *himself* he would have to protect from her, if bad came to worse. His troubles are only his.

That thought makes up his mind for the definite. If Bill is Tale, he's not ready for either of them to find out. He won't entertain that possibility. The instant he is home he is more than ready to turn on his laptop and type.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

someone vibe check edward kaspbrak pls and thank also, if you want to scream at me futher, my twitter handle is kaspbraktm too. so there's that. anyway, thank you all SO MUCH SO SO MUCH for reading and i hope you keep enjoying this. it's slow but i promise it'll get places.

## 12. Chapter 12

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: September 20, 11:27 PM  
SUBJECT: Apologies

Tale,

Hello. This feels awkward. I feel like I should apologize. First, for taking a whole week to write back. I'm sorry if it seemed rude, of if you thought I was blocking you out. You just caught me by surprise and I really had to think about how and what I was going to reply.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I think I should tell you my first instinct was to reply yes. I really want to receive your funny texts, and I could live with your bad grammar and Dora as my contact picture. But then I thought, what if we already have each other as a contact? Derry is a very small town. There's a chance we might have worked on a school project together, or that we are in a chat for a class together, or even if our contacts are brand new, that you would accidentally call me and go into my voice mail. Or even worse, that I would pick up. Then you would know who I am instantly, and I'm sorry but I can't take that chance.

I hope you know that it's nothing against you. Or that I don't trust you, or enjoy writing to you. I do. I just don't think either of us is ready for an event like the above. Especially not me. Again, I'm very sorry. I hope you're not mad or disappointed.

Davy.

P.S. Actually, I do hope you're a little disappointed. My e-mails being the best part of your day and all. Just don't be too disappointed.

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FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: September 20, 11:43 PM

SUBJECT: RE: Apologies

HOLY SHIT. HI. I'LL WRITE YOU SMTH NICE AND LONG AND COHERENT TOMORROW BUT I'M JUST SO GLAD U WROTE THAT I HAD TO LET YOU KNOW. LIKE. RIGHT NOW. THAT I'M NOT MAD. OK. GOODNIGHT.

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FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com

TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com

DATE: September 21, 10:04 AM

SUBJECT: It's whatever

Davy,

Ahem, hello. I did not experience a state a total euphoria upon receiving your, as per usual, gorgeous correspondence last night. I was perfectly calm. If you received anything prior to this, my butler monkey must have written it. I don't know. He has a knack for doing things like that.

Now being completely serious (and I'm sorry I lapsed into jokes. No I'm not. You better have laughed) you have NOTHING to worry about. I'm not mad and I completely understand. You're ABSOLUTELY right. I feel a little stupid, because I should've considered everything that you said. I really should've. You're so careful with these things and the way I treat them must make me come off like an idiot to you. So I'M sorry. Forget I asked. Someday we'll figure it out but right now? You're right. It was a lot of me to ask, and I'm not taking you saying no personally. Don't sweat it.

And I MEAN it. DON'T. Next time you take a week to write back to me after I asked you something risqué I'll THROW-UP. ON YOU. That should be vaguely threatening. Stick to it! Because I was so nervous you bailed out on me for good and that's the last thing I want. So, I mean it. DON'T sweat it. Whatever you have to say will be better to hear than to not hear from you at all. That's embarrassing of me to say. Let's pretend I didn't. And that I didn't click send afterwards. I'll shut up now.

Tale.

P.S. Yes, yes they are. And what about it?

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FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com

TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com

DATE: September 21, 9:06 PM

SUBJECT: But is it?

Tale,

I'll start by saying that when I get thrown-up on, I turn suddenly and mysteriously into Big Bird. Your call. You've been warned. And even if they're bad, your jokes always make me laugh. Your joke book must be quite the thing to read. Thank you for understanding ...and for being embarrassing. I'm flattered that our, as you say, gorgeous correspondence is important to you. It'd be unfair otherwise. It's very sweet of your butler monkey to have missed me so much he had to write back right away. Tell him I missed him too. Once again, I'm really sorry my response took a while. I didn't mean to make you nervous. I didn't even think you might be nervous after having written your question. I'm sorry! Let's stick to questions that are in no way risqué, okay?

Which brings me to my next point: since when *do* you have a butler monkey? And do you have any other pets I should know about? This is an important question. I've always wanted to but never had any pets myself. Allergies. They're unconfirmed but, as you can probably tell, we are very strong believers in the phrase "better safe than sorry" in my household. It might just be our family motto, come think about it. Definitely makes me very excited about my coming out.

Davy.

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FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com

TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com

DATE: September 22, 11: 28 AM

SUBJECT: RE: But is it?

Davy,

So you tell me my jokes are BAD, but that they always make you laugh? Way to toy with my heart.

As for my butler Monkey, sweet Gerard, he's lived inside my head forever. I don't have any real pets either. Not because of allergies, but because my parents REFUSE to trust me with another living being. It's absolutely unfair, as I am a very loving and responsible role model. Denying you of pets just because you MIGHT be allergic sounds a little absurd and unfair to me too. Parental permission is a bitch.

Seeing as I don't have any pets to tell you about so you and your allergies can live vicariously through me, I'll tell you about the pet I've always WANTED to have: a chameleon. Do you see it? No, really. Try to.

I'd buy him a cute miniature Hawaiian Shirt and walk him around on a leash. Like Rango? The movie sucks, I know, but it's kind of what I picture. When I asked my parents for one for the first time I even did research on it, and the conditions they need to live in. It was a very prepared and professional pitch. I even found out you have to get a special permit, and that we meet all the requirements. You have to pay for it, but it's totally worth it if you ask me. Just imagine it, walking a sweet chameleon around the town. If I did it and then got a penny for every old lady who passed out, then I'd be rich enough to get the HELL out.

Is it just me, or does coming out sound easier to do just about ANYWHERE else? Isn't that, like, specifically what college was invented for? So gay kids could be gay miles away from home and everyone we know? We're the cornerstone of Higher Education.

Tale.

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FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: September 22, 8:09 PM  
SUBJECT: Kindest regards to Gerard

Tale,

Don't bring this imaginary chameleon to life and replace Gerard, he's very good at his job. The more you describe it, the more a chameleon strikes me as the perfect fit for you. Pity that your parents want to protect every chameleon from you and your crazy ways. A Hawaiian shirt? I can see why they'd be concerned for it.

I've always wondered about the kind of pet I would like to have too, but I'm nowhere near as creative. The two options I've tried to pitch are a cat and a Pomeranian. The Pomeranian was first, and because I saw a woman holding one on a soap opera on TV. I just really liked it, so I went to the pet store and described it to figure out what breed it was. I was around seven. When I gathered the courage to ask my mom if we could buy one my pitch wasn't very well prepared, and she explained that they have unreasonably long hair that would always be everywhere and carry endless things on it and also their saliva. Then there's the cleaning up after, the vaccinations, all that. In summary, she disarmed me pretty quickly. Parental permission.

I didn't try again until I was around thirteen, and there wasn't a pitch as much as there was a disaster. Here's the full story: I'd just started walking home on my own from the bus stop (yes at thirteen now hush), and this stray cat started following me for a few blocks out of nowhere. It happened almost every day and I didn't tell anyone about it, because it made me feel special, chosen.

I started saving some of my lunch to feed it, and in a matter of weeks he started waiting for me at the bus stop. One time it followed me all the way home, and I let it inside. I only dared because I knew had the house all to myself and I was so excited. I gave it milk and a can of tuna, very cliché. Then I took him to my room. I somehow believed I could keep him and hide him: spoiler alert, I couldn't. When my mom got home I shoved him in a drawer. I don't know why I thought that was a good thing to do. Of course at night when I opened the drawer again he jumped out, terrified, and almost clawed my arm off. My



screaming and the cat's hissing obviously gave us away. The rest of the night was pretty dim.

I can't wait for college. Maybe I'll adopt a Pomeranian then. I hope a dorm room still passes all the chameleon license qualifications.

Davy.

P.S. I attach a file of the song Karma-Chameleon, which I'm sure already know and have claimed as an anthem. You should know it's a gay anthem too. You probably also already know that.

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FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: September 23, 07: 34 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: Kindest regards to Gerard

Davy,

WHAT.THE. HELL. You hear that? Its's me, still crying and wiping my tears from your sad cat story. Seriously. If you're not pulling my leg and that actually happened to you, a) it's straight out of a comic book and you're a straight up cutie, b) it might just be the saddest thing I've ever heard and I'm genuinely sorry it happened. If you're pulling my leg, fuck you. You got me good.

Also, I can't help but notice you're really into Pomeranians? Taking into account that you'd already sent me a picture of one once. Which, again, extremely cute of you. I think what you said of a chameleon sounding like a perfect fit for me also applies to you and one of those little guys. No, I don't think so. I KNOW SO. It's exactly how I picture you. Attached you'll find the exact, little angry one I imagine you as. Especially when you block me for my hilarious jokes and use of the word a-s-s of b-o-o-t-y.

College will be AMAZING. I can't wait either. We'll have a dorm with as many Pomeranians as you want and Seven Chameleons (one for me to walk every day of the week). Also we'll get to be gay. That should be the most fun. I mean, don't get too excited. We don't have

to be gay together. Only if you have the qualifications and our pets get along.

Getting a little more serious, do you really think you'll wait until college to come out? And will you really not come out to anyone in Derry? I won't judge you if that's what you decide. In fact, it doesn't sound like too shabby a plan. But I don't know about me. Certain recent life events have made me consider the possibility of coming out sooner than I thought. Like, really soon. So, yeah. There's that.

My parents don't really seem the type that would throw me out or anything like that, but you never know. In a way I'm more scared of the reaction of the school and the town than I am of my parents. I should consider myself lucky to be able to think like that, but ... you can never know until you do it, you know? If I do and it goes sideways, can I stay in your drawer? I promise not to scratch your face when you let me out.

Tale.

P.S. I'd heard it before, as the classic it is, but I congratulate you on your taste regardless. For the joke book: why aren't koalas considered bears?

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FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: September 24, 9:12 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: Kindest regards to Gerard

Tale,

How dare you. I can tolerate you accusing me of saying I made up a traumatic event, and calling my genuine love for the Pomeranian breed cute, but I won't tolerate you calling me a straight anything. Not when you're the first person I've ever come out to. And the only Derry person I plan to come out to, I think.

It's just, what you said about your parents not feeling like unsafe people to come out to ... you should know you *are* lucky. Because I

too am very scared of the town, believe me. And of the way people and school might act. I mean, of course I am. I haven't insisted so much on anonymity because I'm careless about these things. But the thing I'm most scared of is it becoming public knowledge, somehow, and getting to my house through town gossip. I'm not too convinced I wouldn't get evicted or disowned. Because I am fairly certain what people said about me would matter more than being family, and the horrified looks or insults that people gave me would be too much too endure for my household. Everything I say must make my life sound so depressing?

If you feel safe enough and encouraged to come out I'm glad for you, though. Maybe if people treat you nicely it'll make me feel a little better about maybe doing it myself. How soon would this really soon be? I don't mean to pressure you or be nosy. I ask just so I can be prepared to offer as much support as I can. I mean this genuinely. If you want to tell me, I'd like to know why you're considering it, and if there is anything motivational you'd like me to say. You said that you're not as brave as me a few e-mails ago and I don't think that's true. From everything you say, I think you sound so much braver than me. If you do come out soon, to the mob of jerks and assholes of this town, you'd be my hero. That sounds like I'm pressuring you to. I'm not! If you don't that's also okay. More than okay. What I mean is: go you!

Davy

P.S. Since I'm in a supportive spirit, I'll bite. Why?

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FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: September 25, 08:47 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: Kindest regards to Gerard

Davy,

Say, was this you cracking the oldest joke in the gay book? I CAN'T BELIEVE IT. They grow up so fast. I'm framing it and hanging it in my wall forever. Also, nonsense, my boy. You're not being nosy at all.

Is just ... I don't know. In a way it could be said I'm doing it for you. Not to make this super awkward for you, but yeah. I don't expect you to do it too or anything like that (and especially not after what you just told me, which, I'm really sorry about. Seriously. I'll get back to how furious I am about it at some point), but it's as much as I can tell you about the why.

On the other hand, hey, we should be proud of ourselves. We're out to someone! So what if we don't know exactly who that someone is. Think about it. Six months ago we weren't out to ANYONE. Look at us now. Cracking gay jokes. Discussing a future involving exotic pets. That's the gay lifestyle, baby.

You don't have to say anything specific about this to me. Go You is all I need to hear. Read. And about your cat escapades, and just about anything you want to share. Not to be extra cheesy on top of everything but you might be the person I'm closest to right now, and that's more than enough.

And I'm flattered to be someone you tell things to, too. Especially because, and circling back to my anger point, your life does sound a little depressing. Sorry if it makes me sound like an ass to say it. But the fact that your family makes you feel like that, it just makes me so mad. You're AMAZING. And I'd never throw you out for anything in the world. Not for being gay, not for bringing dog saliva or rabid cats into my household. I have a history with getting thrown out, and I'd never wish it on anyone. I mean it wasn't as dramatic or important as what you're saying, and I'm not even sure it was on purpose, but it was a thing. I won't make this about me. Point is, I'd fight your family if I could. You do what you gotta do to stay safe in this hell town.

Tale.

P.S. Because they don't have the KOALA-FICATIONS.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

these bitches gay good for them good for them. also yes i stole the koalafications joke from a fanart but i couldn't find it again to link it so if you know the one

i'm talking about pls provide so i can link it

## 13. Chapter 13

### Notes for the Chapter:

Hello! I know this update took a bit and I tried to have it ready for Halloween but real life caught up with me. However, I think it makes up for the delay in eventfulness and length. But before you read, I should make a full warning that there's underage drinking in this chapter. Also that I know, love and support bisexual Richie but for the sake of fidelity regarding the original context of the AU, in this fic he will be gay. That's all. Without further ado, here we go.

Ridiculous demands from Henry Bowers excluded, Richie Tozier had been having a *pretty swell* couple of weeks. There may have been a pile of assignments and, some days, even a list of absurd chores for him to perform waiting for him in his car at the end of the day, but to him it seemed like a fair price to pay for his peace of mind. Especially if he was paying it to Henry Bowers. When he thought about it, he wasn't sure if Henry was being merciful, or if he was just a dimwit even in the dim-witted act of blackmailing. The latter seemed to Richie the most likely scenario.

Most importantly, it had turned out to be a scenario he could handle. His sleeping hours may have been cut in half, but the frequency and speed of his correspondence with Davy seemed to have doubled. It'd become an almost daily thing. He'd come to expect it at certain times, and couldn't help but picture *himself* as a Pomeranian puppy, waiting eagerly, frantically wagging his tail when the piece of mail finally arrived. It was ridiculous and he knew it. But what could he do about it?

The admittance to himself that he liked Davy made his own e-mails even harder to write. He had to not just be careful to leave out the specifics about himself and his life, but also use the allowed titbits to (and he *hated* feeling cliché and thirteen whenever he used the accurate word for it), *flirt*. It'd been exhausting and tolling and incredibly fun. It made him read and reread and retype his words a

thousand times over. He wanted to come off playful, but not so playful that his compliments wouldn't ever be taken seriously. He wanted to come off funny without turning crass and annoying. In short, he wanted to do right everything he'd done wrong at twelve, only while going about it almost in the exact same way. The definition of lunacy. And it was driving him somewhat crazy.

Crazy enough to have been distracted when the pressing plans for Mike's Halloween Bash were discussed during Thursday lunch the week before— a discussion he *never* would've missed if he'd been in a regular state of mind. Since they'd been old enough to grasp the concept of a *wild party*, he and Beverly had insisted Mike's barn would be the perfect stage for one. It had been a long suggested, thoroughly planned affair. Except, neither of them thought he would *ever* execute it. Not sensible, responsible Mike. Only he was *going to*, because his aunt was getting an unexpected knee surgery which would put his mother out town during the perfect, Halloween weekend. A weekend on which, as the universe willed it, his father already had an out of town delivery scheduled. Being responsible and sensible, he'd asked for permission. He would keep it *small and simple*, he'd said. Just them and the rest of the basketball guys.

All of this he'd explained while Richie was trying to spin a story. The story of how that morning Greta Bowie falling flat on her ass by tripping on the cords of Corcoran's schoolbag right before Geography had been the best twenty seconds of his day. He was spinning the story for Davy, which meant he had to find a way to tell it without mentioning Greta by name, Geography, or come out like an asshole for being delirious about someone else's flat-assed misery. It was quite the task.

By the time his brain jolted back into the conversation, Eddie and Beverly were already lamenting their slim possibilities to attend. Eddie was *significantly* more worried. He was discussing the term *zoonotic diseases* and the possibility of catching them from Mike's barn, even though he knew they'd stopped owning animals years ago. Or perhaps he didn't, since that had happened in late middle school.

Either way, he insisted Myra would never allow him to go someplace like that, let alone to a *party*. Mike patiently explained that they had, indeed, stopped owning animals —though he claimed the place still

smelled, somehow. At that Eddie made a face and he grinned, reassuring him it wasn't so bad *after a few minutes*. That was when Ben suggested he could say they were sleeping over at *his* house. Beverly called him a genius, and said she would have to say *something like that*.

Something like that was, as far as Beverly's aunt was aware, a sleepover with a girl named *Rachel*. Who is actually a boy named Richie. And who is, on the Friday of the infamous sleepover, sitting at the edge of his bed. Beverly is standing in front of him, patting a sponge dipped in green face make-up against his nose. And asking him to stay still, for what feels the hundred and twenty-ninth time.

"Are you sure you don't want to wear contacts? Your glasses might end up filthy. Especially if you keep –" in reflect, he slides his hand between her arm and his face to scratch his cheek "- doing *exactly* that."

"Sorry ma'am. 'Would that I could, 'bout the contacts, but I can't. My condition don't allow" he responds in a thick Texan accent. Or something akin.

"Really?" she asks with a small, confused frown.

"Really. Stuck with 'em coke bottle bottoms for life" he pouts and sniffs.

"Awe, my poor man" she says in a Southern accent of her own, putting the sponge away. "Let's see how they look, alright"

He grabs them from his lap and slides them up with a single finger, then tilts his head and grin at her. She grins back, a genuine grin. "Never do you mind. I think they look *just fine*. Now go inside your trashcan and keep away, sir. Don't go leavin' *me* green"

With that she grabs her overnight bag and slides inside the bathroom. As soon as she shuts the door he turns to the mirror to glance at his full costume with glasses, to see if they work. They *do*. They go perfect with his costume. He's decided to be Oscar the Grouch. No, not deliberately as a Sesame Street hint for Davy ... but also not deliberately *not* that.



e's wearing a fuzzy hat, fuzzy gloves, and everything green. Including a whole painted face. He's even thrown a flashing green neon shirt on top of it, with equally bright neon blue flowers patterned all over. And he has, of course, cut a trashcan out of cardboard and added a humble "I HEART TRASH" sign to it. He won't deny it; his glasses do wonders for the overall effect. For once the cartoonish, huge shape his glasses give his eyes seems intentional. Perfect, even. He and Davy had discussed Halloween costumes over the past few days, and he's been careful to follow what Davy had denominated as the key elements in costumes in modern times: *creativity* and *accuracy*. He supposes he's getting bold, or crazy, or crazy bold and ambitious.

Not only because he feels so blatantly obvious in his costume choice and design, but because, in that discussion, he'd tried to pry significant clues out of Davy about his own. Of course Davy, being the careful over-thinker that he is, gave *nothing* away. Except the very clear statement that his costume would be accurate and well-made and probably hilarious in a very Davy manner.

Richie had paid attention to the costumes people worn at school, but he'd found nothing. Not that he had expected it, in all honesty. It's *the party* he has expectations for.

Mike tried as best as he could to keep the affair small and controllable, as he'd promised. Key word being *tried*. The news of it had spread like wildfire, and soon it became a party with open invitation. Most of it had been due to the basketball team, and then the football team, and then the soccer team, and then all their girlfriends. Richie couldn't deny he'd had his part in it, too. He'd announced it publicly in drama club and exhorted everyone to bring *whoever* they wanted. The more people who showed up, the higher the chances of Davy being one of them. And once he'd started considering those chances, he hadn't been able to stop.

*Hasn't* been. He knows it's unlikely, and a stretch, yet he can't help imagining it. Someone showing up in just the perfect costume, and recognizing his. Saying just the right words and then it all somehow leads to them making out in the hay. He doesn't remember very well if Mike still has hay in his farm, and he's not the proudest of his thoughts when they start leaning in that direction, but the brain

wants what it wants.

And its wanting it right there and then, as he sits with a blank expression on his face as Beverly emerges from the bathroom a few (long, significant) minutes after.

“You know you’re not dressed scary enough for this bit, do you?” she asks with a grin, snapping him out of his thoughts. He’s a little relieved she thought he’d gone into trance on purpose.

“Anything to get something out of *you*, my sweet, *beautiful* Pippi” he says to her, blowing her a kiss.

She laughs, with no idea as to how much he means it. Even though he’s not *attracted* to her, he does admire her. There she is, dressed as Pippi Longstocking, with fake braids spiking up from her head and ridiculously huge, black freckles drawn on top of her already freckled face and she still looks lovely. She’s deliberately trying *not* to. She’s supposed to look *silly*, he knows. Yet she looks enchanting.

Shaking her head, she catches it. She places it on her cheek. For the briefest moment the certainty that she *knows* crosses his mind. Not that she knows on a conscious, aware level, of course, but instinctively. She’s always slightly less guarded around him. In the way she dresses, and smiles, and flirts back. Sometimes it feels though as if she knows the way she has to tiptoe around the others, yet doesn’t with him. As if she knows he’s harmless, in that regard. And that she’s harmless to him too. Then her gaze flickers to the floor, she says “Let’s go” and he thinks maybe she doesn’t. Maybe it’s just him, being aware of how much he doesn’t feel around her what any other guy would.

They make their way downstairs and when the moment comes to get in the car, an awkward silence settles between them. It feels silly to say it out loud: who is going to be the designated driver? Silly and adult and somehow grand.

Mike had never said there would be alcohol, per se. But he hadn’t said there wouldn’t be, either, and judging by the amount of people planning to attend and the sudden anticipation surrounding the party, it’d be ridiculous to think there *won’t* be. And, knowing the

both of them, that they won't want to drink it.

"Rock, paper, scissors?" she asks.

"Only way I'd settle it. The oldest, most honourable jab" he responds, smiling.

He wins an indisputable four out of five. She insists he should drive them there, if she's driving them *back*, so he sets his trashcan on the backseat and takes the wheel. Despite a couple diversions, namely a pit-stop for cigarettes, contribution snacks and one wrong turn, they are the first to arrive. They can tell before they even park, since there are no cars other than Mike's truck outside. They hesitate before climbing down and knocking. If they have to be the first ones to a party, they consider themselves lucky its Mike's.

He greets them with a huge, grateful smile. He's wearing a perfectly common white and blue flannel and jeans. The only additions are cowboy boots, a hat and a belt. Richie exchanges a glance with Beverly, in which they say to each other: *previously owned, effortless cowboy boots and hat.*

"The fuck are *you* supposed to be, your dad?" he asks.

"So what if I am. But I'm not. I'm clearly a buckaroo, straight out of the West" retorts Mike, grinning and blowing his finger, perked up as a finger gun, "so shut it, *trashmouth in a trashcan.*"

"That I ain't and that I won't. I'm clearly trash lovin' Oscar the Grouch. And *dees* here is my good fren' Pippi, so don't choo go 'roun gettin' it twisted" he says, slipping into a Mexican accent.

"Lovely lady, your good friend Pippin" Mike kisses Bev's hand in greeting. Then he opens the door for them, fully, and they step inside.

If there was any linger of animal smell, Richie doesn't perceive it. In fact, he has a hard time remembering or believing animals ever lived here at all. The room is wide, halfway decorated with cobwebs and spiders and strings of lit lightbulbs painted orange and purple. There are piles of foldable chairs stacked, two empty tables with still

packed plastic cups and empty bowls on top of them, and a karaoke machine set ceremoniously all the way in the back. Richie didn't even know Mike owned a karaoke machine.

"Ay ay ay" he whistles, "someone's been planning dees party longer than we have, *viejita*"

"It's just rentals" Mike says, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand. Very shyly. Why, he's even looking down. Either Mike severely downplayed his excitement about the night or Richie had severely underestimated it. Either way, Richie feels oddly endeared by it, so he wraps his arm around him and gives him a noogie over his hat. "Spendin' money an' all, on what was not even supposed to a *fiesta*. Choo tryin' to impress a woman, Miguel-man?" he goes on as Mike tries to wiggle free. Not too hard, since he's obviously stronger than Richie.

"Leave him *alone*" Bev interjects, "and make yourself useful, trash-man. How can we help you finish setting up, Mike?"

She doesn't need to ask twice before he has them hanging even more lights, filling bowls and unfolding chairs, meticulously setting them so there is a clear dance floor outline. They are halfway done when people start arriving. After a few minutes of incessant knocking, door opening and closing, Mike finally decides to just leave the door open to whoever may arrive. Some people –the younger and politest –bring chips and sodas and other snacks. A group of two guys from the football team and their girlfriends (dressed –very *creatively* and *heterosexually*, Richie can't help thinking – as cheerleaders and players, respectively) bring a keg, and a couple bottles of vodka. Bill, Stanley and the rest of the basketball team arrive together. Stan is dressed as Jesus, and Richie bends over with laughter over it. Bill is dressed like Bob Ross, with a ridiculous wig. There's significantly less laughter over that. The inventory of everything grows –though Richie is sure the bottles of Ginger Ale are Stan's.

After their due greetings and compliments they split up again. Beverly makes her way to the dance floor with Richie. He's once again grateful for her and her talent. Her graceful dancing helps his own goofy motions gain some charm. Until, midway through a song, she stops and swirls them out of the dance floor as easily as she'd

swirled them inside.

He's momentarily dazed, until he notices who is standing at the entryway: Ben and Eddie. She's making her way towards Han(scom) Solo, and Richie's standing awkwardly in place, looking at Eddie, who looks ridiculous. He's still Eddie, only *Munster*. Yes, he is wearing ridiculously short shorts with a tiny blazer and a tie and long socks and his hair gelled all the way back. The lighting is dim, so Richie can't tell if he's painted his face white, but he suspects he has. And he's drawn triangular eyebrows, too.

He doesn't realize he'd just been standing there, staring, until after Beverly has kissed both their cheeks and is waving him over.

"Mr. Space Cowboy" he greets Ben, "looking fine, looking fine. And Tedward still an Edward, I notice" he grins. Eddie briefly gives him a confused rabbit-y expression, and looks him up and down almost imperceptibly. Only Richie notices, and he's unsure whether it's his words or his costume Eddie is trying to figure out.

Then he shakes his head, and says "Yes. I felt like keeping the *Eddie*, just made it a different one" He shrugs and smiles a small smile.

"*And* he didn't comment on the Tedward. An entirely different man indeed" Richie grins.

"What are you drinking then, other Eddie and Han? This one made me designated driver through sketchy and unfair methods, so I need to drink vicariously through *someone*" Bev tells them, poking Ben's chest. Ben goes bright red. Red so distinguishable no lighting can conceal it. *Heterosexuals, honestly.*

"One of whatever you would've liked to drink, I guess" Ben instantly responds.

"A hero" she beams at him. "You, Munster?"

"Something monstrous, I guess?" Eddie responds distractedly. He's glancing around. Richie hasn't known him for over twelve years not to guess what he's looking at, or for: lingering evidence of animal stains. The stepped on puddles of beers and soda that have already

made the floor sticky. Any sign of *Zoonotic Diseases*.

“Something monstrous coming up” Bev responds, and once she guides them to the drink table it becomes evident she *wasn’t* kidding. She pours Ben and Eddie a three second blast of vodka mixed with orange soda, and orange soda alone for herself.

“You, Rich?” she asks.

He grins and points to his sign. “Trashiest thing you can find”

She pours him the same thing, and they clink their cups. Without a care nor a worry Bev thinks from her cup. Ben takes a hesitant sip. Richie a long gulp. Eddie stares at his cup.

“C’mon Munchie, chug” Richie nudges him with his elbow.

“*Chug chug*” Beverly chants.

Much to everyone’s surprise, Eddie squints his eyes and *actually* chugs his drink in one swift gulp. They all cheer. And that’s how, from the most unexpected place, the *real* fun of the evening officially starts.

It only takes a few minutes after the initial chug for Eddie to notoriously loosen up. Beverly has dragged them all to the dance floor again, and what started as shy movements from Eddie has turned into shameless jumping up and down and bobbing of his head. Ben keeps awkwardly twirling Beverly and she keeps laughing. Richie must be losing up as well, because even if what Eddie is doing is ridiculous, he starts thinking it looks tremendously fun and jumping along. Eddie notices and smiles at him, trying sillier and sillier moves to see if he’ll follow. Richie does. A couple songs into the mindless jumping and head bobbing Stan joins their little circle with an astonishingly good robot Eddie then attempts to replicate, only to fail miserably. He breaks into a fit of laughter. He laughs with his whole chest, and Richie can’t remember the last time he saw him laugh like that. He has to laugh along.

Song after song plays and song after song they dance, until it starts tiring them out. One by one, starting with Stan, they head back to the stillness of the snacks table. Ben starts throwing chips into the air,

and Beverly tries to catch them with her mouth. Then Mike interjects with the phrase “Guys, the *floor*.” They say “sorry” and, giggling, start again as soon as he’s turned his back.

Stan simply stares at them and shakes his head. “That’s it. We’re helping him clean up tomorrow” he says, and promptly scatters away to help Mike with his host duties.

Eddie and Richie watch him go, then share a look, and laugh. Beverly and Ben start making a more serious sport of the chip tossing, Beverly taking a further step back every time she manages to catch one. Ben’s gaze intensifies. He focuses so hard on getting it right. Soon he has a fistful of chips ready to throw on his hand, and they drift away into the crowd.

Richie turns to Eddie and feels an impulse. Following it, he throws a chip at his face. It smacks him right on the cheek. At the smack Eddie frowns and he opens his mouth to say something, then glances at the chip on the floor and huffs. “I’m not putting something you touched in my mouth, if that’s what you’re getting at” he says.

“*Kinky*” Richie responds, also on impulse.

“Don’t say kinky”

“You’re the one who phrased it like that!” Richie laughs.

“You’re the only one who would *think* to say kinky after I said it like that” he snaps back.

“Damn right I am, sweet Eds of mine” he grins proudly.

He expects an instant ‘don’t call me that!’, or a bolder and slightly alcoholised ‘it’s Eddie, dickwad’. All he gets is a moment of silence, and a look he can’t fully decipher. The second one of the night.

“What?” he asks, grinning wider. Eddie seems to snap out of thought, and shake his head.

“Nothing” he responds. Except in Eddie’s mind, *everything* is happening at once. Because a thought has occurred to him. Sudden and perfectly sensible. Richie really is the only one who would say

kinky after someone says something like that. Even if his sense of humour rubbed off on half the world's population, it would still be *his*. And he finds himself, also thinking, that he would recognize it anywhere. And that maybe he *has*. Because something about Richie wearing a Sesame Street costume had jumped out to him the moment he saw him, and he hadn't been able to figure out what. Or maybe his mind had been locking it away. But it's a tipsy mind now.

And his tipsy mind, regardless of how much he commands it *not* to, thinks of Tale. And how Tale is scared of Big Bird. And how when they discussed the fact Halloween costumes they determined they *should* be accurate and creative but also, if possible, *scary*. And Richie is Oscar the Grouch and a Sesame Street character *would* be scary, for Tale. As soon as it truly dawns on him, he wishes his tipsy mind would sober up and lock it away again.

Except! It could just be his drunken mind slipping, after all. Couldn't it? Mixing wishful thinking with scattered facts. Turning someone he'd once desperately liked into someone he suspected could, *might*, like him back.

"What activity do you suggest we partake in then, since you refuse to let me put stuff in your mouth?" Richie asks, grinning madly to himself. He's tipsy too, evidently. Eddie doesn't know whether that despairs further him or relieves him. It's such a *Richie* joke, his rational mind tells him. Then why does it sound so much like *Tale*? The mad half insists. He wants to silence whichever one dares suggest they could be the same person.

"You can go dance, if you want" he responds, truly wishing he would. Because suddenly he's *very* afraid to be drunk, even if only slightly, around Richie.

"And leave you all by your lonesome, creeping in a sad, sad corner?" he pouts.

"It's Halloween. Creepy is allowed" Eddie insists.

"Not if it's the wrong kind. Sounds to me like what you need is some liquid courage to keep your bones a-shakin'. What say you we go for the second round?"



“I don’t think so, no”

“Tell you what, then” Richie lifts his finger, points at nothing in particular, then crosses his arms. “Name a bad song. Any song.”

“For what?”

“Just name one”

“Okay. Erm, anything Nicki Minaj”

“Wanna specify?”

Eddie shakes his head. “*Anything* Nicki Minaj”

“If you feel so strongly” Richie courts, “here’s the deal: if someone, anyone, sings Nicki Minaj in the next, what, four karaoke rounds? You drink up. No one does, I do.”

Eddie looks at him, prepared to say ‘No way.’ But Richie’s wearing a beaming smile and his glasses are hanging from the very edge of his nose which should mean nothing, make him feel nothing, but it makes his curiosity spike. Not just spike, absolutely overcome him. Because then if Richie loses, and he asks the right questions, he could *slip*. It’s a terribly manipulative idea. He hates it the instant he has it. It’s invasive of both Richie *and* Tale. Because they are Richie and Tale. *Two people*. And if there is the slightest possibility that they aren’t, his rational, sane mind is certain this isn’t how he wants to find out. The idea of Richie being Tale is exponentially more mortifying that the idea of Bill. And, his rational mind reminds him, he shouldn’t be considering *either*. He shouldn’t be considering at all.

But his rational mind is not the one in control at the moment, so his tipsy mind blurts out “Alright.”

“Shake on it?” Richie extends his palm.

“You got it” Eddie shakes it.

They each grab a handful of pretzels and go sit near the machine. Some younger girl is singing a terrible cover of an Ariana Grande song. Hardly anyone around her is paying attention. Eddie realises

karaoke is a very self-indulgent activity, truth be told. People only care when they're the ones holding the microphone. He concludes that's what is so liberating, and contradictory, about participating. On top of a speaker there's a notebook with a sign up list with names and songs. Eddie notices, and reaches for it. Richie quickly jerks him away. "No cheating. Has drama club taught you nothing about show business, Edster? It's all about the *anticipation*."

"Right" is all he replies as they sit down. *It's all about the Anticipation*. By the end of the night he could know who Tale is. He shouldn't be anticipating that knowledge so badly. The song is almost over.

"Allow me to give you some field advantage. Let's say this chick was zero. Next up, number one."

Eddie doesn't recognize number one. Number two is something by Drake, he thinks. Number three is Halsey. He feels confident. He smiles. Then, his face falls. Number four is Superbass.

"What will I be pouring you?" Richie gloats, not even three notes in.

"*Whatever you want*" Eddie mumbles, covering his face with his palms and slumping in his chair. Not only is he a terrible loser, but he's a mortified one. By the end of the night, Tale could know who *he* is.

Richie rushes away, blissfully unaware, doing an evil laugh.

"Close your eyes" he says the instant he gets back, holding the cup behind his back.

"No, why?"

"So it'll stay a mystery drink. Also the colour turned out gross and I know you." He's grinning so wide. Its despicable.

"I hate you," he says, un-burying his face from his palms and glaring. Only he can't glare too hatefully. There's an amused spark, glinting.

"All *sore losers* do"

Eddie closes his eyes, putting his hand out. Richie carefully gives him the cup. Eddie inhales sharply, squints harder and takes a long sip.

He doesn't even let the flavour linger in his mouth. "If I die, I'm namedropping you in my goodbye note. My mother will haunt you until the end of time."

"Already does. Can't get enough of this sweet *thang*" Richie replies, predictably enough. It's the same joke, every time. And he looks so *proud*, every time.

Eddie sighs. "I walked straight into that one. No one to blame but myself"

Richie laughs. "Finally he accepts his part in the lunacy. An enabler" Then he straightens up and says: "Okay, my turn. I betcha in the next three ... no, not even three, two rounds, someone's going to do a super bitter breakup song or something like that."

"I never agreed to play this more than *once*" Eddie scoffs. "I refuse to keep being an enabler."

"Yes you did, you enabler. It was *implicit*. Can't wiggle your cute little way out of it now. Now hush, and wait for your demise. I hope it's Adele. When people with bad voices do Adele it sounds like dying cats."

Before Eddie can argue any further the next turn starts. It's two of the basketball guys doing "Shake it Off" in schoolgirl outfits. It's ridiculously fun. Both of them laugh. Then some girl in an elaborate costume sings an Anime song only she would recognize, and it's terribly depressing. Richie puts on the smuggest smile, and turns to say something when the third song begins. Then he tugs Eddie's blazer. Much to their delight, it's Stan doing 'Uptown Girl'.

They are both instantly wrapped up in that sight. Eddie takes out his phone and starts filming as quickly as he can. Stan notices almost immediately, and glares at him rabidly. Eddie giggles and Richie giggles and they have to hush each other to try and keep the video pristine. Stan flips them off from the stage. It would seem they aren't the only tipsy ones. Nor with some sort of ongoing gamble between them, since Ben and Beverly are *whooping* and *wooing* from somewhere further back.

“Your turn again” Richie says once Stan climbs down, offering him another cup.

“We were done playing.”

“Oh but we *aren’t*, and I won this round babey. Pay up”

“No you *didn’t*. There wasn’t a single break-up or heartbreak song.”

“We don’t know for a fact that Miss Weaboo’s wasn’t an absolute *tear jerker*. Sure made me tear up a little” he pouts, and wipes a non-existent tear from his eye.

“We don’t know for a fact that it *was*”

“Touché” he says, and lifts the cup. He raises it and *gulps it* away without another word.

Eddie narrows his eyes. “Not fair. You poured mine”

“I followed the exact same recipe.”

“How would *I* know that?”

“You’ll just have to trust me on that one” Richie shrugs, plopping into his seat. “Kay, what’s your next pick?”

So they play a few more rounds. Their count of wins and losses and what turn they’re in turns foggier and foggier with each drink, until the game is reduced to trying their best not to laugh at whatever poor soul has stepped up and into the mic. Soon enough they find themselves booing and laughing shamelessly. Richie propping a coy Eddie into it every time, though any outsider would argue they’re equally brutal. And equally entertaining. No one dares disrupt them, or stop them.

Until right in the middle of a Football player’s drunkenly heartfelt ‘Somebody to Love’, when they laugh *too hard* for him to stand. He stops. Furious, he walks straight up Richie’s nose and asks what’s so funny. His bad voice, Richie responds. He dares Richie to do better. Sure, Richie responds. Eddie snorts at that. Only the football player thinks Eddie snorted at *him* again, and grabs him by the collar to

throw him onstage too.

Richie and Eddie share a confused look, and laugh at finding themselves up on the dreaded stage. They're at the point where they'd laugh at anything, Eddie thinks. They have to be, if he's laughing and not wheezing over the fact that he is standing there. Being stared at by *everyone*. And, quite possibly, about to *sing*.

The music starts again. They share an amused look. The football player is staring at them, nostrils flaring, and in their exchanged glance they say *what the hell*. They belt it out. Before they know it they have their arms around each other and are pointing and yelling and dramatically flapping about. The song ends, and everyone who'd been bothering to pay attention claps. It'd been so terrible and yet so grand even the football player himself is clapping, laughing *with* them. Richie bows repeatedly, blowing kisses around. He's basking in it. Eddie grabs his arm and pulls him down, cheeks glowing red.

Richie is still laughing when they make it back into their seats. Then he puts his arm Eddie, unprompted. He looks them right in the eye and says, suddenly, sincerely, drunkenly. "I've missed you, Spaghetti Man"

"Me too" Eddie says, all to really, all too sincerely as well. Then *has* to add, "even when you call me that."

The next song starts.

Richie keeps looking at him for what begins to feel like an uncomfortably long time. And the thought nags at him again. That it could be Richie. Richie, all this time. What's worse, he thinks, he might've wasted all this time distancing himself from him when he could've gotten *so much closer*. If Tale is Richie then ... then maybe they wouldn't have needed secret E-Mails. They could've told each other. In person. Figured it out long ago. And he wouldn't have had to write about his horrible cat story because he would've known already. And –

"Why *did* we stop being friends?" Richie asks, out of nowhere. As if he'd been reading his mind.

Except he hadn't been. Because to Richie, Davy remains a completely closed, guarded mystery. A mystery he gave up on solving, admittedly, after chugging his first cup of vodka and soda. Not intentionally. In the back burner of his mind the alarm was still latent, but the truth of the fact is he *had* missed Eddie. And being so close around him again and teasing him again, even if it wasn't precisely in their soundest state of mind, had made him realize something. Two things: one that yes, no shocker, he still likes *likes* him, and probably always will, a little bit. But the second, that he likes him as a friend, too. So much. So very much. Probably even better. And even if he can never get anything more, he wants the friendship back desperately. He's been trying to get it all night, and to grasp it feels monumental. And he *has* to know why it slipped away in the first place.

Only Eddie takes a beat too long to reply. Long enough that Richie's stomach knots, and he's almost instantly regretting having asked. He thinks, hopes suddenly, fiercely, that Eddie's not replying because he doesn't know what he's talking about. That he'll scrunch his nose and his brows and say 'What?' in that slightly higher pitched tone alcohol's drawn out. That he'll say 'I don't get it' or 'Why are you saying that?'. What he actually says knocks the air out of his stomach for good. Eddie says: "Do you *really* not know?"

And Richie doesn't know what to make of that. His expression has never been more unreadable. He's looking at him, with his eyes widened and his brows curved sadly, but he's smiling? The tiniest smile? It's genuinely unreadable. More than twelve years, at least six of them being best friends, and Richie friends his face *unreadable*. "No?"

"No?" Eddie snaps back, and it suddenly shifts into one Richie can read all too well. *The* angry one. "No? No. Of course you don't" he scoffs. "You didn't think I? I mean ... all the ..." he gestures motions Richie hates to recognise. Ruffling of hair and teasing and leaning his elbow on his head, "and the *Spaghetti*, and the cute *and*" he groans, "what was *I* supposed to think of *that*?"

That response leaves Richie speechless. All he can think of it is: *he knows. He's known all this time. He knew. That's why he pulled away.* How could he not. Henry Bowers had told him it'd been plain as day,

hadn't he? *I've been saying it for years. Years, man. Years.* And Eddie had heard it. Even if he'd never asked about it or acknowledged it or what would've been worse, mocked him, too, Eddie *had* heard it. And then he'd gone and called him cute and teased him relentlessly. What *was* Eddie supposed to think of that? Even if he'd tried to be a friend, a friend so good he hadn't wanted to believe it or think anything of it ... until Richie's big mouth had made it impossible to ignore. Maybe he'd stepped away because he was being polite. Of *fucking* course. When it really comes down to it, Eddie's so polite. Politely removed himself from the weird kid who had a crush on him and was going to get him into *so much shit* for it.

He wants to say *something*. He wants to say 'I'm sorry, I didn't think you noticed' or, 'I'm so stupid to be making you spell it out to me when you'd had the decency to ignore it and me for years' but he can't force anything to come out of his mouth.

Because every time he'd stopped to think about it and let himself acknowledge, fear that this was the reason Eddie had drifted, he'd dismissed it. He told himself he'd been careful. He told himself he'd teased everyone, and that there was no way Eddie could've known. That Eddie hadn't ditched him. He told himself it had *just* happened, that these things just happened and Eddie being colder and annoyed was just Eddie *growing up*. That Eddie didn't hate him. But Eddie's still looking at him expectantly, with his eyes huge and his eyebrows raised and his head slightly tilted forward. Richie *gulps*, choked on an avalanche of words.

He's letting seconds pass, and he's aware. They'd stood frozen, staring at each other, trying to read into their looks and minds. Until Eddie suddenly jerks his gaze away and stands up. They're abrupt motions, and he flicks his gaze back for an instant. Then away again. Opens his mouth. Closes it. "Forget it," he says.

And its final. He walks away. Richie stays frozen in his seat, following Eddie with his gaze until he walks out of the barn. Then he just stares blankly at the entryway. His brain refuses to acknowledge what has just happened. He knows he should stand up and deal with it, somehow. But he would have to accept it first. Accept that Eddie had never and would never like him back. That drifting had been his quiet, slow form of rejection. He had suspected that, always, but hope

is the thing that dies last. He knows the confirmation could've been more brutal. Still, it's pretty smothering. Because it was an angry, disappointed one. Maybe frustrated, that he hadn't even been able to admit it to his face. Only stare at him, paralyzed. Now he was gone, and it seemed the chance at friendship again, that had been so precious and so closed and so *missed*, in every sense of the word, was gone too.

A hand taps his shoulder. He hopes it's Eddie. He turns back. It's Sandy Olson, from AP Calc. She's dressed as a kitten, with a grey dress and handmade ears. She drew a black heart and whiskers on her nose. He imagines she's easy to find cute. Especially as she's beaming a coquettish smile at him. "Your duet buddy bailed on you so fast?"

Richie lets out a bitter snort. "You could say that"

"Aw, too bad. You did really cool together" she keeps smiling. He supposes he has to smile back.

"You could always get a new one. Or" at this she bats her eyes, "even better, we could just dance. You seemed pretty good at that too, earlier."

"Guess so. Thanks?"

She extends her palm at him. When he takes it and stands up she loses balance. So, she's not sober. That explains the randomness and bravado on her end of the conversation. She drags them into the dance floor and stands so close to him it's suffocating.

"Can I tell you something?" she screams into his ear.

"Sure, what?"

She giggles, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I'd been meaning to talk to you *all* night," she giggles. "All the semester, if I'm being honest. I had to do drink, like, six beers just to conjure up the balls to talk to you. I mean, I could've done it just with one. But you weren't alone for five freaking seconds. Five. So I had to think while I waited. Drink. Drink, not think. Everyone's like, just talk to him Sandy. And



Jess, she told me, like, have you seen him? Have you seen you? It'll be like flirting with a spider. Like. He'll be more afraid of you than you are of him. Or something like that"

At that he has to laugh. Broadly. "Like a spider? Do you ladies find me *that* bad?"

Sandy laughs too, and pokes at his chest. Or where his chest should be, under the cardboard trashcan. She's pointing at his sign. "Positive. But hey, lucky you. Some of us *really* like trash"

"Really like? That's not good enough. You gotta *love* trash. Otherwise, you know, *scram!*" he tries his best at an Oscar impersonation, but he can tell he's off his game. Evidently she can't, as she laughs harder and louder and pulls herself closer.

"I could *love* trash" she says. And before he knows it she's pulled herself even closer. So much closer. She's pulling his neck, and pressing her mouth against his. She has an immediate flavour of beer and soda and some other alcohol combined, and with no warning nor flare she's shoving her tongue so deep he knows he has to put a stop to it. He'd be an asshole not to. She's clearly not sober and he's not even into this. But he can't.

He can't because he's also scared if he does she'll throw a fit and ask why and perhaps be one of those girls who would assume not wanting to make out with her *must* make him gay. Only she would be right. And doesn't feel like arguing it or denying it or coping with anything that has to do with it any further. Not tonight. So he leans back. He doesn't *do* anything other than let her kiss him. She doesn't stop for quite some time. People begin *wooing* and *whistling* and he doesn't want to open his eyes to make sure it's at them. Encouraged by the crowd, she lifts her leg to wrap it around his waist. That is *too* much, and he gently pulls her away.

He's not shocked to see people gawking. But he *is* horrified to see Eddie standing *almost* right in front of him, just a couple heads between them. The second their eyes meet Eddie rolls his eyes and walks out and away again, without a word. Richie wants to throw up and he's sure he *will* throw up.

The words throw-up make him think of Davy too, and it makes it all so much worse. He feels like such an asshole. So caught up in the Eddie of it all he hadn't stopped to consider Davy. Davy who might be somewhere in this room and maybe he'd been looking maybe he'd noticed his costume and maybe he'd been thinking, like Sandy, that he should walk up to him and say something. Only he'd been busy trying to win Eddie's friendship over. Again. And then kissing with a girl. No, not kissing, fully making out with her. In front of everyone. So if he'd been there and even considered approaching him ...now he definitely wouldn't. The one thing he'd wanted out of the *entire* party. To be walked up to, and recognized, and kissed. Thanks, Sandy. She's staring at him, biting her lip, her left eyebrow raised. He shouldn't resent her. People keep staring at him, expecting him to say *something* tonight, and his mind keeps going blank. *Make your bed and lie in it*, he thinks. That should teach him the value of keeping his mouth shut, occasionally sometimes.

"Yep, definitely got the spider thing now. Officially too much for me. Erm, ciao" he babbles before running away, and out.

Eddie isn't out. He circles the barn looking for him. No sign. Ben's car is still there, so Eddie has to be somewhere around. He rushes inside again through the back door and bumps head first into Beverly, who clearly was about to pick a fight, but at the sight of him gasps winningly "Mr. Tozier, *whoa!*"

"Ben and Eddie are still here, right?" he asks dryly.

"Um, I don't know" she responds, taken aback. Her expression hardens, and she tilts her head slightly in concern. "I said bye to Ben about two minutes ago. You might've just missed them. Why?"

"Had to tell them something" he answers quickly, making for the door.

"Oh I think they know, champ" she grins at him again. He doesn't want to respond to that, so he just goes.

The car is gone now. By his calculations it seems impossible, but it is. He sits outside, leaning against the wall. All he can do now is wait for this thing to be over, and hope everyone (Sandy, especially) will have

forgotten about the last fifteen minutes by Monday. He pulls out his phone and checks the time: Two twenty-five. The party started at eight. So, it's late and the general alcohol blood level must be high. It isn't a delusional, impossible thing to hope for.

At two thirty-one Beverly finds him outside. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Just needed a moment. The ladies have gone haywire. Seen a taste of what getting some of this is like, and now they all want a free sample" he responds, trying his absolute best to sound perky. And failing. He doesn't have it in him not to be slightly grossed out at his own words. It all feels stupid.

"Oh, *I get it*" Bev smiles. She smiles so sweetly and so sincerely Richie believes he's never loved her more. "Want to head home now, lover boy? I'm lucky one who gets to take you"

He nods, wordlessly. She extends her palm and he takes it, then he kisses her hand. Before pulling away she cups his cheek for an instant, and this time he genuinely smiles back. "Don't know what I ever did to deserve that honour, *Miss Scarlet*" a beat. "Not when Benny boy wants it so badly" he can't help saying.

"Beep beep now, Richie."

They don't need to say much else. Beverly, with her cheeks red and a secret smile fighting its way in and out, gets them home. No one is waiting up. All the lights, except the porch and the stairway's, are off. They tiptoe their way in, as quiet as mice, and then head straight inside Richie's room. He lets her use the bathroom first, to rinse off her make-up and change into her pyjamas. Every sound is *so loud*. He occupies himself by setting up his sleeping bag –he's obviously giving her the bed –and tossing clothes and extra pillows off the bed. He can hear her brush her teeth, and then she steps out.

He steps in, and after a couple failed attempts at rinsing his face with soap and cold water only to end up with greener hands and a wet face, he gives up and takes a full shower. He brushes his teeth *during*. Nasty habit that never ceases to appal his mom.

By the time he steps out Beverly looks sound asleep, and breathes like

it, too. He shuts his eyes and attempts it. But all his mind replays for him is Eddie's expression. *Do you really not know?* The weight of Sandy's leg on his waist. Eddie's eye roll. His breathing becomes jaded. He turns and tosses, pleading any other thoughts to *please* pop up. Or even static. His stubborn brain says no. He has to do something, or he'll implode.

"Bev" he whispers. "Bev,".

She groans.

"Beverly"

She groans again.

"Beaver. Wake up."

Again she groans, and throws a pillow at him.

"Beverly. This is important. Respond."

"What?" she mumbles.

He takes a deep breath. He can't believe it and he can and he doesn't want to overthink it. He just needs to get the words out. Out loud. To someone.

"Bev, I'm gay" he says, finally. He says it quietly and quickly. Clearly, he hopes, because he's not sure he could say it again.

"Ha-ha. Funny. Let me sleep now" is all she replies.

And he's so tempted. He can almost feel himself giving up, giving in. Letting it stay at that. Tell her she dreamed it, if she ever asks. But he'd gotten the words out. *He'd gotten the words out.* And he knows, somehow, that if he doesn't claim them now, if he doesn't take that step now, he might *never* try again. They'll be stuck somewhere between inside and out forever.

"Beverly, I'm not kidding" he adds, a little louder and a little surer.

Silence lingers a few seconds. "What?" He sees her shadow prop

herself up on her elbows, and turn his bedside lamp on. *Click*.

“Richie, if you’re fucking with me I *swear*” she’s fully turned to him now. She’s blurry, but he can feel her stare.

“I’m not” he responds quickly. He moves only to retrieve his glasses and put them on. He needs to look at her, *truly* look at her. The gesture, so simple, seems to give the moment the seriousness it needs. The gravitas. He sees it land on her face. Her hesitance turns into openness. She isn’t smiling, at least not widely, not plainly, but her face acquires an unseen warmth.

“You’re not. But what about the ... tonight? Sandy?” she asks, softly.

He sighs. “I don’t know, Bev. I don’t fucking know. She just went for it, and I didn’t know how to stop her. I wanted to, I just” he rubs his face and his eyes from under his glasses. It would be so cliché to cry. He won’t cry.

“*Rich*,” she says, and stretches her hand out. He holds it. “Rich, honey. I’m sorry. Do you want to ... talk about it?”

Their gazes are fixed on each other. He shrugs. “Do you?”

“Only if you want to tell me. *What* you want to tell me. Did you realise it, just know? With Sandy?”

He shakes his head and *gulps*.

“Then how long have you known?” she asks softly. And he can see her intent. She’s not trying to pry. She’s just trying to ease him into talking.

He has to close his eyes and shift a few inches, just to lay on his back. A position he deems *therapeutic*. He takes another deep breath.

“I realised I was *weird* when I was like, ten. I didn’t wanna think or say gay yet but ... *yeah*”

“Don’t say *weird*, Richard.” She throws another pillow and squeezes his hand. She’s smiling a little now.

"Okay, okay. *Not straight*" he smiles a little too, and squeezes back.

"Much better. And *gay*? When did you land on that?" the bed creaks so he imagines she also moved, still not letting go of his hand.

"A couple of blissful, internally completely freaking out filled years after that. Around thirteen, I'd say"

She's silent for he doesn't know how long. "That means everything that Bowers said ... and did. Oh God" she squeezes his hand again. "*Rich*"

"Yeah, yeah. The gaydar on that guy. Makes you wonder, right?" he tries to chuckle, but it doesn't reach his throat. It comes out choked. Sad.

"I want to kill him" is all she says.

"I've tried. He must have like, a thousand lives."

Silence settles between them again. It's not an uncomfortable silence, yet it's a heavy one. He can imagine her thoughts. She must be replaying memories of them. Of him. Adjusting them to this new light.

"Thank you for telling me," she breaks it.

"Thank you for listening" he replies, meaning it entirely.

"Rich" she sounds hesitant now, and his head plays a funky noise. *Internet dial up*. Like her searching for the right words is not just palpable in the air between them, but audible too. "Am I the first person you've told? Tonight, or today or ... ever?"

"Yes" he says bluntly. He's beginning to imagine what she's getting at. Will she hit the thousand dollar question.

"Then what ... did something happen with Eddie?" *Ding ding ding, we've got a winner.*

"I didn't tell him. I asked him something stupid and he just ... I think he knows. But I'm not sure. He kind of hinted at it, but I didn't say

anything, and then he just left.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “Do you *want* him to know?”

“I don’t know. I mean, yes. I want to tell all of you, at some point. You’re my best friends and it’s weird and lonely that you don’t *know*. But at the same time *him* knowing is just ... *eugh*”

Silence reigns again for a second. He can’t believe she has to piece it together. Does she? She snorts quietly, and shuts herself up. Apparently she did.

“*Oh Eddie Eddie I love you so*” she sings softly, and he can hear the laughter on her face. He doesn’t want to open his eyes and *see* it, so he pats around for a pillow and throws it in what he hopes is her direction.

“*Loved* you so. And it *was* crushed *on*, at *most*” he says half-heartedly.

She’s still holding his hand, and she squeezes it again. As to signal, *that’s all*. And he feels it could be, this time around. That the hardest part could be over with her. She starts laughing, to make it official. It’s still soft and warm, and he squeezes her hand in return. To reassure her that it is. That she can add some teasing to it now, and she does.

“Oh *sure*. A crush *at most*. You called him *my love*. Your fifth grade notebook must have Mr. Richie Kaspbrak written over and over again” she laughs a little harder now.

“That’s it. We’re done” he says, and opens his eyes.

They lock gazes for a second. He sticks out her tongue at her, she smiles. They finally let go of each other’s hand, and he turns off the light.

He waits until she’s rolled back into position and closed her eyes before he says.

“And you’re dead wrong, by the way. I scribbled Mr. *Eddie Tozier*”

She snorts so loud he lets out an instinctive, guttural ‘*shhhhhhhhhhhhh*.’

“Don’t worry, Richard Kaspbrak-Tozier. Your secret’s safe with me” she whispers.

“I know” he responds.

It isn’t long before they’re both asleep.



## 14. Chapter 14

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: November 2, 11:46 am  
SUBJECT: COSTUMES OFF BABEY

Davy,

HELLO. I don't even know how to begin this e-mail without screaming. I know I'm supposed to ask how your Halloween was and if you got to do any apple bobbing like you wanted to, but I gotta skip the pleasantries and get right to it. I got BIG NEWS. I CAME OUT TO SOMEONE. Yep. Halloween was WEIRD. As per your request I won't go into detail, but craziness happened and out of nowhere I couldn't hold it in anymore and I just TOLD. Spooky, right? I mean, it was just to ONE really close friend and I'm not gonna lie to you, it was the SCARIEST ten seconds of my life but ... holy shit, I did it. I. DID. IT. I woke up and I still couldn't believe it. I had to make sure I didn't just dream it or hallucinate it. And my friend was really cool about it. We agreed to keep it between us for now, but it's ... there's no backtracking from it now, you know? I said it out loud to someone. Someone knows it, and they know me ... and it's cool? They're cool? We're cool? I just, I don't know. It's like nothing changed but at the same time it's all different. I can't describe it but it's nice. SO NICE.

To be extra clear, I'm not trying to put pressure on you or anything by telling you this or having done it, but ... you should give it a try. It's an amazing feeling, and I want you to feel it. Insert sex joke here. But not really because I'm serious about this and how I think you deserve it too. Kind of made up for some of the other weirdness that transpired, which doesn't matter because I DID IT. WOOO.

Okay, I'm done. Now you can tell me your pleasantries.

Tale.

\*\*\*

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: November 2, 3: 03 pm  
SUBJECT: RE: COSTUMES OFF BABEY

Tale,

Really? Wow! I'm very happy and excited for you! I'm glad that you did it and that your friend took it well. I'm sorry if this comes off dry, but I really am happy. Seems to me like Halloween was weird for everyone. Might just be a symptom of aging! There was no apple bobbing involved, which was the first disappointment of the night. The second ... that I kind of did something similar? Only it didn't go so well. It might be a little bit my fault since I didn't exactly say it in full words and terms. However, the friend I said it to is clearly very severely impaired by heterosexuality and may not have understood what I meant. Actually, I'm certain he didn't, at all.

Or at least that's what I hope, since I've yet to be questioned about it, or talked to about anything at all, and his reaction wasn't exactly good. It wasn't bad or hateful or anything terrible either it was just ... I don't know. To be honest I just hope he didn't understand and quickly forgot about it.

Still, I'm glad you did something worth remembering. Never mind my story, actually, since it adds up to nothing and might only ruin yours. Yours is really great, and definitely the one we should be focusing on. That feeling sounds amazing and hearing about it is definitely making me feel better about giving the whole coming out scenario another chance. Or rather, a real chance. Maybe not soon and definitely not to the same person, but, woo?

P.S. On the brighter side I scored a bag of miniature Reese's cups. One (1) reason to live.

\*\*\*

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: November 3, 1:53 pm  
SUBJECT: RE: COSTUMES OFF BABEY

Davy,

First of all, I mind your story. Your friend kind of sounds like a dickbag. Don't need to know the details to see that. And if he got it and he's straight up (pun intended) ignoring you for it then ignore him right back, baby boy. Once we're married you can borrow all my friends. Mi casa su casa. Or at least just this one that's already cool with our butt stuff. On the topic of our love, am I not your one reason to live already? What do Reese's Cups have that I don't? :(

Your sweet and delicious,

Tale.

\*\*\*

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: November 3, 8:47 pm  
SUBJECT: RE: COSTUMES OFF BABEY

Tale,

You know any other day I would block you for using the phrase 'our butt stuff' and everything that came after it, right? But today you're spared. I need to stay on your good graces if I want to borrow your friends at a later time.

What do Reese's cups have that you don't? Let's see ... you've both cheered me up today ... apparently I don't get sick of either of you even if you're cloying ... and I suppose I'll write a better answer when I can think of one. Not that I wrote any of this to begin with. I've been hacked. The hacker is typing this right now. Cybersecurity authorities have been alerted.

Goodbye.

\*\*\*

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: November 3, 9: 01 pm

SUBJECT: RE: COSTUMES OFF BABEY

IN CONCLUSION: YOU'RE CALLING ME A SNACK. ROGER THAT ;)

**Notes for the Chapter:**

sorry if this is confusing but i promise everything will make more sense when we see eddie in the next chapter

also! i found this fanart which considering richie's costume in this fic i felt was very important to share with the class:

<https://cloud-official.tumblr.com/post/188917963424>

## 15. Chapter 15

Advice, Eddie thinks, is meant to be followed. Not all advice, of course. Only advice he has carefully evaluated, and deemed worth following. Case in point: Tale's advice to *Ignore him*. At first Eddie hadn't considered it legitimate advice. It sounded more like 'cheer up' advice. The type of advice that means to tell you you're right more than it means to tell you to do anything.

Yet, when faced with the prospect of having to see Richie on Monday morning, he can't think of much else to do. Certainly he doesn't want to talk about what happened. First, because there had been alcohol involved and he's still struggling to remember the exact words he'd used (which made it pointless and unfair to discuss it at all), and second, because it just seems horrifying.

But he doesn't want to pretend *nothing* happened, either. Because some part of him *is* mad. Even if he can't remember the exact words that were used, he can remember the way Richie had looked at him. Gaped. His stare blank. And then shaken it off like it'd been nothing and made out with some strange girl in the dance floor not two minutes later.

That'd conveyed a message stronger than whatever words had been used. And he's not sure he can pretend he didn't receive it at all. All of which makes the advice of just ignoring him seem not perfectly sensible, but the only thing to do.

It has been quite some time since he intentionally set out to ignore Richie. Early middle school, to be precise. At first the attempts turned out similar to a Physics experiment: just observing the phenomenon seemed to be cause for it to go sideways. Richie hadn't allowed himself to be ignored. The stronger Eddie's resolve had been to ignore him; the further Richie had gone to catch his attention. The crasser and the louder Richie's jokes had gotten, the more Eddie had deliberately limited his reactions.

Come think of it, Richie bluntly asking him about *why* it'd happened made some sense. He'd tried his best to part from him effortlessly, but it'd been a tug war.

Eddie fears these renewed attempts will be no different. Even if there is some pre-set distance between them now, he still knows Richie well enough to be sure if he wants to make himself known, he will find a way. Which makes him, once again, extremely grateful for Stan. Driving with Stan has two enormous benefits: that they are *always* early and that he is *never* alone.

As predicted they arrive fifteen minutes early, and he takes no risks by going to his locker. He waits for Stan and they're at the door for Homeroom eight sharp, ideal minutes early.

Except there's an oddity at the door. For an instant he believes she could be an Omen, and cannot tell whether she's a good or bad one. *She* is a girl he's certain they've never seen before. The first thing she notices about her are her overalls covered (accidentally, he can tell) in splatters of paint of various colours. Her wide eyes and her nose, freckled all over. She has a pencil (neon green, glitter) tucked behind her ear, and at first doesn't see them – she's busy staring at the paper (a schedule) in her hand. He exchanges a look with Stan, and they stand still as to let her walk in first. She bumps into them nonetheless.

"Sorry" she says, in an oddly fitting high voice.

"No problem" Stan mutters, "after you", and he takes a step back.

She walks in and they stay by the doorframe. Eddie feels compelled to move, yet Stan's own stillness ties him in place.

"This is junior homeroom, isn't it?" the girl asks meekly. She must have been feeling watched, since she turns to them twitchily, smiles and looks at a fixed point behind them, not *at* them.

"Yes." Stan snaps.

"Okay. Thanks" she tugs the straps of her backpack.

The three of them freeze in frame. She takes a deep breath and bites her upper lip. She makes no effort to conceal the fact that she's carefully scanning the room.

"You can sit anywhere you like. There's no assigned seats. Not

institutionally, I mean. People just try and get the best one as they arrive. So it's good to arrive early" Eddie explains, offering her a small smile.

"Just not the couch" Stan blurts, authoritatively. His expression is perfectly still and perfectly stoic. Stan isn't the *friendliest* with strangers, it's true, but he is usually politer. Eddie observes him for a second, then turns back to the girl. She's staring at *the* couch.

"Wasn't going to" she replies, raising her eyebrows and scrunching her nose. "It looks ..."

"*Disgusting*" she and Eddie say at the same time. He's always thought so –though he's never said it, because Ben insists on sitting there, to no one's surprise, because Bev quite likes it – and he lets out a chuckle at hearing someone else say it.

"And you haven't heard the stories about it. What people say other people have been caught doing *on* it" Eddie shivers, and the girl fully laughs.

"I don't want to imagine it. Too bad I can't un-imagine it" she says, and her smile hasn't faded.

"We like to sit there" Stan says, still so flatly Eddie feels a wave of tension Tsunami into the room. He can almost see it, wash over her and Stan's expressions.

"Oh."

"Once you've sat on these wooden chairs for eight straight hours, it becomes worth trying to un-imagine" Eddie adds, attempting a smile. He's certain it comes off nervous and weird. In his defence, the atmosphere is nervous and weird. "I'm Eddie, by the way"

"Pat" she stretches her hand, grinning. Eddie takes it, and she shakes it merrily. "Short for Patricia. Patty's fine too, only it sounds middle aged"

Eddie can't help chuckling. "Short for Edward, which also sounds middle aged, I think. This is Stan" Eddie says, gently pulling his hand away.

“Stanley” he says, shaking her hand so briefly he barely touches her. There’s a silent pause before Stan adds “That’s what Stan is short for.”

“I figured” Pat smiles wider. “Nice meeting you. Any safe zone you’d recommend?” she gestures towards the chairs.

“Anywhere in the middle should be safe.” Stan finally smiles back – a smile Eddie is seeing for the first time in his *life*. It’s small, lopsided, both forced and contained at once. In one word, disastrous. Yet Pat keeps on a perfectly normal and somewhat cute grin.

“Got it” she briefly turns to Eddie before hopping off to a seat precisely in the middle and slumping into it.

It takes her giving them a thumbs up with both hands for them to realize they haven’t moved and, what’s worse, are staring. Stan quickly darts for the couch. Eddie gives her a thumbs up back and takes his place next to Stan. He briefly considers inviting her over, then he looks at Stan. His jaw is so tense he fears it’ll snap. Dislocate.

Silence settles in the room. Stan is sitting at the edge of the couch, where Eddie had meticulously foreseen sitting as to have Stan between him and however arrived next (in the almost impossible scenario it was Richie). Except now he’s been left at mercy of chance.

What feels like an eternity (but is probably only three minute) later, people start wandering inside. Thankfully it’s Mike who takes the seat next to him, and Bev sits next to Mike. Bill sits in the chair next to Stan’s edge. Ben sits by Bev’s. Soon enough Mrs. Gorey comes in, and Richie sprints in just as she is about to close the door shut. A jolt of panic travels across Eddie’s spine at the sight of him, and it only intensifies for the millisecond their eyes meet. Eddie flicks his glance away. Richie heads for the chair next to Bill.

“First order of the day, let’s all welcome our new transfer, Patricia Blum. Miss Blum, if you’d please stand”

Pat stands. This must be excruciating and Eddie has no clue why it is a ritual teachers feel compelled to perform. Though he has never



been ‘the new kid’, he has had several nightmares about it. A majority of which involve nakedness and some sort of radiation. Inwardly cringing at the thought, he offers her a supportive, sympathetic smile. Almost the very same one he’d once offered Ben, when Ben had been the new kid. She happens to be looking at him, and smiles back. “Pat is fine” she announces to the class, and sits back down.

“Now, would any one of you be so kind as to show Miss Blum around? She has her schedule with her, so it’d be useful if you used this time to point her to all her classrooms and other places of interest”

“I’ll do it” Eddie exclaims on impulse. He didn’t realize he’d jolted up from the couch as he spoke. He had quite literally *jumped* at the chance to stop being in the same room as Richie.

“Very well. No late passes for any of your next classes, so be sure to get yourself and Miss Blum there on time” Mrs. Gorey states from behind her glasses. Eddie nods in response. He makes for the door, and holds it open for Pat. By the time she closes it behind her, they can hear Mrs. Gorey has already moved on.

They walk together in brief silence, which Pat cuts short by thanking him. She explains that after two days in a row of meeting neighbours and getting stared at by practically every person she crosses, she’s glad not to have to talk to anyone new for a while. He says “you’re welcome”, and asks her where she’s from. She explains she’s lived in Georgia, Atlanta, Los Angeles and most recently –and for the longest time –in New York City. Needless say, Eddie is quite impressed.

She explains that she has never lived in a town where everyone knows everyone, and he agrees on how daunting it can be. He asks questions about New York City, its subway (is it really rat infested?) and whether or not she’s ice skated in the Rockefeller Center. She answers that only mildly and that she hasn’t, because it is usually hoarded by tourists. By the time he’s shown her the library, the cafeteria and some of her classrooms, he feels he has known her for much longer than fifty minutes.

The feeling is evidently mutual, and they’re thrilled to discover their

schedules are almost exactly the same. They have World History with Ben. As a former new kid he is perfectly amicable with her. By lunch, he seems to have gone from amicable to fond. And she has eased enough to suggest they have lunch outside of campus. "I've seen the cafeteria already," she says, "now I'd like to see a little of what's out there."

Eddie and Ben remind her that only seniors are allowed to leave campus, and are forced to admit that neither of them owns a car. She seems a little deflated, but not defeated. She explains that being a new face has its advantages, since no one has no way of knowing she *isn't* a senior. And she *has* a car.

Pat hadn't stricken Eddie as someone who would *do* rule breaking, let alone suggest it. Then again, he's known her for three hours. While normally he would consider and explain his one thousand and one reasons not to (what if they find out? What if they realise we're missing and call our homes?), the idea aligns way too perfectly with his Richie avoidance plan. Ben is hesitant about it, and suggests they ask Stan.

"I don't know. I think he hated me" Pat says.

"Stan hates everyone at first" Eddie justifies him.

Ben doesn't argue that Stan didn't hate *him*, though comparing to the morning scene (which Pat and Eddie have already described in detail), he thinks he must have at least liked him better.

"Okay. We'll do it if Stan agrees", he says.

Eddie reaches for his phone and writes:

**pat is taking us out to lunch in 10! meet us in the parking lot if you want to come! :D**

Ben and Eddie are admittedly surprised when not one minute later, Eddie's phone *pings*.

**Coming.**

They head to the parking lot, and Stan doesn't take very long to

appear. It doesn't take long for him to put on a puzzled expression either.

"Where is everyone else?" he asks.

"Um, we only told *you*" Eddie clarifies. He isn't sure why that is something that requires clarification. If the seven of them are supposed to be *the* seven of them again, he hasn't received the memo. Nor would he approve it, under current circumstances.

"*Who* is everyone else?" Pat asks.

"Doesn't matter. You'll meet them tomorrow" Eddie snaps quickly.

"Or we could invite them today" Stan insists.

"If we wait for them to put themselves together we won't be back on time. Or we might not even eat. Let's go" Eddie yaps, already turning on his heels.

Ben shrugs and Pat mimics his gesture. She leads them to her car (blue, new and nice). It's almost immediately agreed that Eddie should co-pilot, and after throwing in a couple suggestions and counting their lunch money (Pat starts them off by displaying a debit card, which puts their individual budgets to shame), they opt for *the* mall food court. There is only one mall in Derry, and it isn't much to look at nor is it particularly entertaining to shop in, but it is a short drive away from school. They arrive in under ten minutes thanks to Eddie's instinctive directions, and almost immediately split. There is one great advantage to the food court: no one needs to settle. Everyone can have their pick. Ben goes straight for Panda Express, Stan and Pat get burgers while Eddie gets a smoothie and chips.

The place is almost empty, so they have a wide table to themselves. The first few minutes are agonizingly awkward. Stan is responding only in sharp monosyllables while Pat is hopelessly trying to pry conversation out of him. Until the unexpected happens.

Pat makes a joke about being willing to damn herself over a Double Whopper since she has high doubts Burger King is certified *kosher*, and Stan snorts so suddenly and so hard soda splutters out of his nose

right into Pat's face. He looks mortified about it, but she laughs it off. He grabs a napkin and extends his hand to offer it to her, but instead she leans her face over. He wipes the soda off her nose, and they smile at each other. Their gaze lingers. Stan blushes. Ben and Eddie share a look. Then Stan offers to buy her an apple pie for dessert as an apology. She accepts.

They get up animatedly, and Pat begins asking Stan what Eddie imagines to be other standard getting to know you questions as they walk away. Whatever trouble Stan had had conjuring up answers longer than one word, now he seems to have the opposite.

Eddie and Ben are flabbergasted.

"*What* did we just witness? What *are* we witnessing?" Eddie asks.

"Love, I think" Ben responds, a sheepish smile on his face.

"In under eight hours? *Unbelievable*" Eddie shakes his head, but he can't help smiling a little, too.

He has always known Ben to be a hopeless romantic, and to be hopelessly in love with Bev. And usually, he thinks, he would've been the rational side of the argument. He would say love is a strong word and that it's impossible because they've known each other for what, ten minutes? So it can only be them thinking the other is attractive at best. And he would say Stanley has never shown interest in anyone so they don't even have any way of knowing *how* Stanley shows interest.

The odder, oddest, thing is: he barely even thinks it. Because the thought of Tale strikes him first. He can just see him –well, not a specific face, an outline of *someone* –spilling soda on Eddie from laughing too hard. It just seems like he would. And he imagines himself leaning across the table the way Pat had, and Tale wiping the soda off his nose, and smiling. And the word love doesn't seem so strong or idealistic or impossible.

The thought pops in his head so organically that he doesn't realise the magnitude of it at first. Once he does, it's frightening. Not frightening in a way that petrifies him, but rather in a way that drives him. Not the way the phrase 'chirurgical intervention' has

frightened him all his life, but the way the word ‘college’ has made him daydream.

It’s a real prospect. Well, somewhat real. Because he doesn’t know who Tale is, exactly, or what he might look like, nor does he feel prepared to tell him who *he* is, looking like himself, *being* himself... but he exists. He exists and he is someone it isn’t *badly* frightening to have these thoughts about. Someone, he only then realises, he thinks of as a sort of boyfriend. Which is insane.

Ben must have been thinking similar thoughts of his own, because Stan and Pat find them in a peaceful silence. Each one of them is holding two small pies. Eddie and Ben thank them and grab their own, but continue to leave them engrossed in their bubble of conversation. They even glance at each other, fully meaning to eavesdrop. What is most amusing to Eddie is that Stan would generally notice and be furious about it, except he doesn’t, and he isn’t?

“It rained lizards yesterday” he says to Ben with a cheeky smile.

“I heard. And there was also an avalanche caused by the world’s biggest ball of rubber bands. Twenty thousand injured” Ben responds matter-of-factly, grinning.

“Oh yes. Quite tragic. Didn’t *all birds* in the planet spontaneously combust, too?” he asks, adding special emphasis to the words bird and combust.

“No, they were spontaneously fried. I think a massive potluck is happening in the main square today. And a memorial too. RIP *all birds*” Ben continues.

“A moment of silence” Eddie says, solemnly closing his eyes. Ben does the same and chuckles.

Stan and Pat remain lost in their own conversation. Apparently he is bragging about having completed a five-hundred-piece puzzle –with no picture, just all same colour pieces, mind you – during his summer vacation. Apparently that is something she *does* find very impressive, and is offering to paint a picture on it for him. What is all the more

astonishing, he says he would *really like* that. Ben and Eddie continue staring at each other, supressing giggles.

It's admittedly a tragedy when Eddie's digital wristwatch beeps, announcing they have fifteen minutes to get back to school. They make it back with eight minutes to spare. It seems all the more shameful that Ben and Stan have Literature with Mrs. Alvarez while Pat and Eddie's class is with Mr. Mellon. Not only because they have to say their goodbyes until further notice, but because it is Ben who gets to tease (or at least question) Stan about his notoriously odd lunch behaviour. He supposes he will have to wait until the car ride back. He tries not to give Pat the widest, most knowing grin imaginable too, but he does. She smiles back.

He wants to ask her about it. His mother has told him countless times gossip is impolite and he absolutely mustn't do it – before spending three hours on the phone with his aunt. But he barely knows Pat. In a day, could they be friends good enough for him to ask? Him, Stan and Ben aren't even good friends to openly discuss crushes. Not real, meaningful ones at least. Only celebrities and impossibilities. He and Stan know about Ben and Bev, but only because it's impossible for anyone not to. They've never directly asked him about it, and he's never told.

But maybe making a new friend means he *could* get to talk to someone. He could even get to tell her *everything*. Asking her something this simple could be a start. A way to open that door. He wonders if it would be bad and cliché to trust a girl with it first, and to establish the trust by asking *her* to gush about boys. He thinks he shouldn't, he thinks he should, he thinks maybe he could, and he is about to, but a couple of kids push pass them to get to class and the bell rings.

He nudges her softly as they enter the classroom, and they sit together. He is so caught up in his curiosity that he forgets Richie is in that class with them. He barely notices him sitting in the back, and doesn't register him at all. He is busy observing Pat. He notices every smudge on her overall, and that she has pen drawings on it that certainly weren't there in the morning. Her shirt is wrinkled. Her notes are full of doodles and her handwriting is messy. She chews her pen.

He can't help being entertained at how those details are the very opposite of Stan, with his pressed shirts and his pristine handwriting. Yet he had seen them click, like *that*. In under eight hours. Pat may indeed be the best omen, if Eddie's love of Cherry Cola and Tale's devotion to Pepsi is meant to mean anything at all. He lets himself think this silly thought. It's an okay silly thought, as long as he can keep in mind its silly. Keep it rational and contained.

He's deep adrift in thought when Pat nudges him, and slips a piece of paper on his desk. He opens it. It's a drawing of a huge cloud with alligators and electrocuted chicken falling from it, with what he guesses are portraits of him and Ben standing under an umbrella. Underneath it all, a single sentence:

*I heard you!*

He snorts loudly before he can help it. As quietly as he can, he tears a page out of his own notebook and writes:

*Could have fooled me :D*

Feeling bold, he even scribbles a couple hearts next to it. It's small and it's casual ... and it could be a significant first step. He slips it to her. As soon as she opens it her cheeks flush, and she turns to him to shrug exaggeratedly. Both of them burst into laughter.

"Mr. Kaspbrak, Miss ... Blum, is it? Do you mind sharing what is it about Harper Lee's work that you find so hysterical?" Mr. Mellon asks them, glaring owlishly.

"I was lamenting the lack of actual mockingbirds in it. Sorry," Pat says in a quiet voice. Eddie sinks into his seat.

"Right. If I had a nickel for every time someone made that joke, I'd be rich enough to retire" Mr. Mellon answers in a strange tone Eddie thinks might've been meant to be comedic. He's clearly awaiting some sort of response, so he and Pat are forced to chuckle. That seems to be good enough for him, and he continues with the class.

*Lamenting the lack of actual mockingbirds.* Eddie smiles to himself. He's definitely telling Stan she said this.

The next two periods pass by in the blink of an eye. She's following him to his locker when it occurs to him he hasn't asked, "What club did you join? It wasn't in your schedule."

"None" she says nonchalantly.

"You can't join none. It's mandatory to be in a club"

"I said I would pick by the end of the day. They say any could open for one more person, except those you have to audition or try out for. I'm considering the live painting one"

"You don't want that" Eddie states so bluntly he shocks himself. A beat. "It's live. That means they bring a model once every week. And the model poses. *Naked*. You have to stare at someone naked for at least an *hour*. They make the parents of everyone in that club sign a consent form"

She's silent for a moment. "Never mind. My parents are never signing that form."

He gives her an understanding nod.

"What club are you guys in?"

"Drama" Eddie beams. "Just me and Ben, though. We signed up for the tech jobs. They sound less exciting, but they're actually fun. We do the sets, and get to control all the equipment in the cabin. We get headsets, and on the day we tell everyone where to stand and where to go and make sure everything is ticking like clockwork. We aren't on stage, but we pretty much run the thing"

"I see" she nods. "That does sound fun. Where, um, where does Stan go?"

Eddie grins at the question, but deflates at his own answer. "Basketball"

"Ah."

"You should join me and Ben, really! You won't get to be on the play, this year at least, but if you like to paint, there's much to do with the



sets” he encourages her.

“That *could* work” she tilts her head to the side, considering.

“And, well ... Stan stops by a lot. When they’re off season, or they finish practice early. Some other guys on the team are also friends with us, and a couple of the actors too. So, you know”

She covers her face with her hands. “Am I really *that* obvious?”

Eddie snorts. “No, *you*’re not. *He* is”

“Really?” she asks, eyes gleaming.

“Really” he nudges her again. He knows Stan would –and probably *will* –kill him, if he ever finds out, yet he can’t help adding, “I’ve known him all my life, and I can’t think of a time someone has made him laugh so hard soda spills out of his nose. And he’s known you for a day”

He thinks of someone who has come very close, but he doesn’t feel like mentioning it or him just yet.

“So you *don’t* think I’m psychotic for crushing on someone I’ve known for a day? And telling you, who I’ve also known for a day, that I am?”

“Absolutely not” he smiles. If anything, he thinks, *he’s* psychotic for liking someone he’s never met. And for accepting that he does so easily. And to realise that for days he’s been thinking of them as a *them*. Even amidst the Richie situation. It should be weirder to him than it is.

Now she nudges him. “You’re cool, short for Edward. I’ll gladly join your tech crew”

He beams at her. “You’re cooler, short for Patricia. We’d be honoured to have you.”

She links her arm with his, and as soon as they arrive to the auditorium they walk up to Mrs. Albright.

To her, any eager pair of hands in the crew is a blessing. Though Eddie usually enjoys being in the cabin and managing equipment more than he does working on scenery and props, he decides to stick with Pat for the day. Mrs. Albright lets him, as long as he leaves someone else in charge of his usual tasks. Ben is excited to find out she's joined them, and the three of them get to work on what will be banners on the stage's fake stadium and locker rooms. Pat turns out to have excellent calligraphy skills, so she does all the tracing while he and Ben do the colouring.

They're sprawled on the empty orchestra pit, where everything happening on stage is audible, if not always visible. Eddie has gotten used to tuning it out, and he's even forgotten its ongoing, when Pat suddenly snorts. Then she comments "The kid playing Mr. Applegate is *really* good."

"That's Richie!" Ben sounds so proud. "You'll meet him at lunch tomorrow. He and Bill and Bev hang out with us"

"Don't tell him you said that, though. He's an *actual* demon. Boost his ego once and he'll never let you forget it" Eddie says flatly.

"That's true" Ben agrees, smiling widely, "but he *is* good. He wasn't so much at first, but he keeps getting better"

"So, Richie, Bill and Bev. They're the mysterious others who you didn't want to invite to lunch today?"

"And Mike. He's in the basketball team with Stan"

"And we didn't *not* want to invite them" Eddie rebukes, "it's just the more people the longer it takes to decide where to eat, and who drives with who, and we wouldn't have gotten back in time, or even to a place to have lunch in the first place, like I said. That's all"

"Okay" Pat raises her arms. "Just asking"

"Also Richie is the bane of Eddie's existence" Ben says jokingly.

"He *isn't*" Eddie doesn't look up from his paintbrush.

"You *did* just call him, and I quote, an actual a demon" Pat adds

playfully enough.

“Aha! So that’s why my ears were *a-burning* and my chest was *a-heaving*” Richie exclaims out of nowhere in a voice that is half Bugs Bunny half Elvis Presley. “You wound me *ever* so deeply, Tedward”

Eddie looks up to see Richie slinging into the pit, a careless grin on his face.

“What do you want?” he asks, his heart suddenly drumming so loudly and so quickly he wonders if its visible.

“Just to see you and your sweet little face, since you’ve been gone all day” Richie lurches toward him in a gesture that indicates he should brace himself to have his cheeks pinched, and he flinches.

“Seriously, shouldn’t you be up there?” Eddie insists.

“Why, I wanted to introduce myself to the wonderful and renowned Patricia” he say, turning to bow to her, “also, Mrs. Albright sent me to retrieve you from this artist’s den. She needs you to teach Mitchum how to dim the lights and synchronize them going off with the sound. Your absence in the cabin is quite literally killing us all. Can’t you just get back to your station and end our collective misery?”

“Wait, you’re not usually down here doing this? You’re up there, *really running* this thing?” Pat asks.

“I guess” Eddie gives her a shy smile. “But since it’s your first day and I’m still officially your tour guide” he shrugs. He fails to mention *and I was doing my best to avoid the very person next to me.*

“Eds!” she beams, “you were relieved of that duty hours ago. Go do your thing!”

“You’re sure?” he asks her. He gives her a look he telepathically pleads she can read as *please say no*. One day is clearly not long enough for this level of mental synchronization, he realises, because she nods.

“Didn’t you hear me? People are dying, *Eds*” Richie insists, dragging the Eds somewhat ... bitterly?

“Okay, fine” he stands up, carefully places the paintbrush he was using in a can, and heads out of the pit.

“Ciao Benjamin, Milady” Richie courtesies again.

Eddie can hear him coming behind him, and doesn’t dare turn to look. If anything, he fastens his pace.

“Wait” he hears Richie call for him. He’s torn between stopping and not stopping, when he feels his hand grip his shoulder. Defeated, he turns around.

“Yes?”

Richie just stares at him, blank. Again. Eddie waits. Silence. He raises his eyebrows slightly. “Weren’t people dying?”

Without a word, Richie licks his thumb and rubs it against Eddie’s cheek. It happens too quickly for Eddie to move away. He can only flinch after, and furiously rub his palm against his cheek, avoiding Richie’s gaze. “The hell. That’s *gross*”

“Geez, sorry. You had paint there” Richie says grimly before sprinting away.

Eddie heads to the cabin without another word. He stays there for the little time there’s left, and takes his time turning off the equipment and rolling up cables at the end of rehearsal. He wants to make sure the actors are gone before leaving the cabin. He can’t comprehend why, but he’s all the more furious at Richie now.

He can’t believe he chose pretend nothing happened and then put his saliva all across his cheek. Does he not realise how flirty that is? Unsanitary as well. Either he really is clueless or he has to be the most insensitive person to exist. Maybe both. He can’t believe he even considered he could be Tale. He can’t believe he’d *wanted* it to be true, even if just for five seconds.

He thinks of him again, making out with that girl in the middle of the dance floor and he can’t believe he’d *liked* him. Not anymore, he tells himself only to find out it gets truer by the second. Now he has Tale. Tale who was absolutely right to tell him to ignore Richie. He *should*

treat him childishly because he is a child. As he's heading out, he inadvertently brings his cheek to where Richie had brushed his thumb and rubs it again.

The sight of Stan at the parking lot perks him up significantly. He's leaning against his car, as he imagined he would be. Only he doesn't have his arms folded, and he isn't tapping his foot. He isn't staring, waiting, ready to scold him for being seven minutes late. No. He's chatting with Pat, rubbing his hand against the back of his neck. *Casually.*

"Here comes the light and sound man, indispensable to show business" Pat grins once he reaches them.

"Late too" Stan adds, though he sounds far from nagging about it.

"Well he's *indispensable*" Pat insists, widening her smile, not looking away from Stan.

"If you say so" he smiles back.

"I better get going, before late becomes later" Pat announces. "Until tomorrow!"

She waves. She's already turned her back on them and quite a few steps away when Stan exclaims at her. "And the day after that!"

"Sure thing!" Pat screams back.

Eddie is trying his absolute best not to laugh. He fails, letting out the smallest chuckle. That seems to snap Stan back into the fact that he has company, and he quickly turns to open his door, not daring to look at Eddie.

"Not *one* word" is all he says.

Eddie zips his mouth and throws away the key, though a small smile keeps fighting to stay put. Stan turns on the engine, and then the radio. Preppy pop plays. He doesn't change the station. He's smiling to himself, and Eddie doubts he's aware he's doing it. The shocks continue. Eddie is afraid if he says anything at all he'll make Stan self-conscious and ruin it, but after a couple blocks Stan starts (Eddie

is sure, involuntarily) humming. Then he has to say: “*Stanley*”.

“What?”

“You’re humming.”

“I am?”

“You are.”

He smiles a small smile. “I guess I am”

And that says it all.

“You know what else you are?” Eddie asks, grinning.

“What else am I?”

“The Man.”

“*Why?*”

“Why do you think?” he grins wider, and Stan’s smile grows too.

“Stanley the man-ley”

“*Quiet*” he’s grinning now as well.

“Stanman the man *can*”

“*Quiet*”

“Stanford the man stud”

“Stop, you sound like Richie” he chuckles.

Eddie doesn’t. That *does* quiet him, and his smile shrinks.

He wants to tell him *Fuck Richie*. And tell him why, and everything that comes with it. Only he doesn’t.

Because Stan is still smiling. He’s carefree and happy and humming again, and just shared with Eddie something he’d never shared before. That show of trust, enormous and tiny, reminds him of the

importance of their friendship. Lifelong, unconditional friendship. Friendship where they feel they know each other better than anyone. He doesn't want it to change. He doesn't want *anything* to change.

"Don't insult me" he says, conjuring a grin out of he doesn't know where, considering how much he means what he said.

Stan laughs, and it briefly feels like it never will. However good or bad that may be. Tale is already out to one of his friends. When will *he* find the courage to be?

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I'M SORRY THIS UPDATE TOOK SO LONG AND I DIDN'T PROOFREAD IT AND AAAAAA but life got hectic and i got writer's block from pure exhaustion. oof. however winter break is upon us and i promise i'll update a lot more often by then. however .... love at first sight stanpat rights! and me being a great fan of dramatic irony. anyway, if you're still reading this and enjoying it ... thank you so much. kudos and comments are always very much appreciated. and feel free to yell at me on twitter @kaspbraktm. okay. bye

## 16. Chapter 16

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: November 5, 7:14 AM  
SUBJECT: Friend borrowing

Tale,

Watch it! Turns out your friend borrowing services might no longer be required, so you and your bad jokes are again under probation. You've been officially notified.

On the topic of friends, I want to say thank you. I don't know whether you meant it or not, but everything you said really did help me deal with mine. Okay, I didn't exactly deal with the situation, but it feels sorted out. It's hard to explain, but good things are happening! I wish I could tell you more without making who I am painfully obvious (which would result in me having to move to a different planet), but I feel like change might not be so difficult after all. People surprise us all the time. And sometimes it's nice to be surprised by them.

Wow, all of that sounds really sappy. Bottom line is: I'm feeling optimistic about it not going terribly. At least not with my really close friends, I don't think. I might even consider trying it. Definitely not today or tomorrow, but, you know. Sometime.

Enough about me. How is *your* week so far? How is life out?

Davy.

P.S. If you are a snack, it's only because you should only be consumed occasionally and in moderate doses. Ask any dentist.

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FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com



DATE: November 5, 7:51 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: Friend borrowing

Tale,

As BETRAYED and DEVASTATED as I am that you're putting me under probation again, I'm also glad everything turned out fine and that you're feeling sappy. It's cute. Go for it.

As for MY week ... meh? I don't know. It feels kind of ....?????? Because WELL, I didn't think it would make much of a difference at first? I mean, like, outside my inner peace and all that. But then my friend gave me this look today when something happened with this one (1) guy who haunts MY LIFE and I don't wanna talk about because he's a little turd BUT! The look made me feel both I HATE YOU STOP THAT RIGHT NOW and also ... nice? Like, sharing something I thought I'd have to keep to myself forever. Not forever *forever*, but you know, until-college-forever. And like, have fun with it? In a way? So, yeah.

It's weird because you think it's gonna change everything, then you do it and after getting though it you don't think it's really gonna change much, then you realise it does change everything in the smallest ways. Like I said, it's weird! But I definitely recommend it.

All and all that's what's cookin', good lookin'. OH and I have a French pop quiz on Friday but Fucké Thaté because it's boring to talk about and you're probably gonna tell me that's something I'm not even supposed to tell you. OH BIEN.

Adieu,

Tale.

P.S. Just admit it already. I'm your peanut butter sweet loving Reese's cup and you can't get enough of me. I asked your dentist

---

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
DATE: November 6, 8:02 PM

SUBJECT: RE: Friend borrowing

Tale,

Thanks for the encouraging words, I guess? I mean, although I haven't done it, I think I can understand what you mean. It's part of what's scary about it. You have no idea. I mean you do, but also don't. You found it funny I'm assuming, but for me getting teased about girls I couldn't possibly, realistically, *physically* like made me go so red and breathless I don't even want to think about what getting teased about someone I truly like or liked might like would be like.

Well, I sort of can, but not with everyone knowing that's what's actually happening. Because, I swear, my friends tormented me in the worst way possible and had no idea. I don't know if them knowing what they're doing would make it better or worse. If your experience is anything to go by, I do hope it makes it better. Or at least genuinely fun? Getting teased about girls was torture.

Also you're absolutely right. You're not supposed to tell me that you have a quiz on Friday. Probably just how I'm not supposed to tell you this Math assignment you've blissfully distracted me from is impossible and definitely going to keep me up all night, but now you know.

Davy.

P.S. No.

---

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com

TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com

DATE: November 6, 10:22 PM

SUBJECT: STOP PERPETUATING STEREOTYPES

Davy,

I am DISSAPOINTED, HEARTBROKEN, and APPALLED to see you actively harming the gays the way that you are. I cannot believe you, out of all uptight and well organized individuals are out there

perpetuating and embodying the harmful stereotype that gays CAN'T DO MATH. I myself actively battle against this horrible Hollywood Archetype by getting Straight A's and would love to tutor you out of your misery, yet your desire to stay anonymous for the drama of it all only perpetuates stereotypes further. Sad face.

No but seriously, it really does surprise me. You sound like a nerd in every sense of the word, perfect grades included... and I mean it in the most flattering way possible, you nerd. I really am good at math so if we can figure out a way for me to help you, you got it.

And dare I inquire as to who were the ladies that quite literally took your breath away? And most importantly, the gentlemen? I know you're obviously not gonna name names, but I'm sort of curious as to how you found out it was the gentlemen that did it for you and not the ladies. I don't wanna go all shrinky or nosy on you, it's just ... for our excessive talk of bootyass and butt-stuff, I don't think this is a part of it we've ever talked about? You can totally ignore the question if you want to.

As for my answer I was around ten and this one (1) individual laughed so hard at one of my jokes he cried and snot started coming out of his nose which is just about the sexiest thing a ten-year-old can witness, obviously. It wasn't a big revelation at the time, but in hindsight that was a Moment. Then when I was thirteen I met this kid from out of town, tried to flirt, it was DISASTROUS, but I knew for sure. Also all those times I watched BTTF even though the plot objectively sucks.

Tale

P.S. :(

---

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com

TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com

DATE: November 6, 11:43 PM

SUBJECT: RE: STOP PERPETUATING STEREOTYPES

Tale,

Literally what? It's not my fault that Maths are homophobic, in any case. To the point where I really rather answer your question than keep working on them, so here it goes.

I think for me it was also around ten or eleven years old. My mom is a big fan of old movies, and one night when I was supposed to be asleep I went downstairs for a glass of water and she was watching a very old version of Tarzan in the living room, one of the Johnny Weissmuller ones (if you don't know what I'm talking about, please do yourself a favour and google them). I must have stood there lurking for about twenty minutes. At the moment I told myself it was because it was Tarzan and it was cool, but I was still so embarrassed by it I never told anyone. Now we all know why.

But it didn't truly dawn on me until I had a dream about someone. Before you even think about saying anything gross, no, it wasn't that kind of dream. It was a perfectly normal dream where we climbed a tree, only when he helped me climb down, I kissed him. When I woke up I was somewhat panicked, but mostly with a clear thought process: 'So that's what this is. Alright. Now, what am I going to do about it?'. It was a fairly emotionless, analytical epiphany.

Since we are being nosy ... is this one (1) individual the same in all your stories? And if so, do you still like him? You don't have to tell me. I don't even know why I'm asking.

Davy.

---

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com

TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com

DATE: November 7, 7: 13 AM

SUBJECT: RE: STOP PERPETUATING STEREOTYPES

Davy,

AIWEDASRTG3Y6H3TRF YOU HAVE TO KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING. ANAL-YTICAL. CLIMBING UP A TREE? YOU DON'T NEED TO BE A FREUDIAN GENIUS TO FIGURE OUT HOW THAT, SUBCONSCIOUSLY, VERY MUCH WAS ONE OF THOSE DREAMS.

IT'S WAY TOO EARLY FOR ME TO BE ALMOST PEEING MY PANTS FROM LAUGHTER. I CAN'T STOP LAUGHING. ANALITICALLY CLIMBING UP TREES.

Okay I'm done. It had to be said. Also, yes, as I've previously stated he literally haunts my life, but the second part, nope, not anymore, PARA NADA. I think I still did a little at the beginning of the year, if I'm being honest. But now? Not really. He's being so hetero I think I've developed an allergic reaction.

Seriously, you should see him around this girl he's started hanging out with? And, okay, this is something I KNEW was gonna happen at some point, yadayada, so believe me I don't mean it as someone who may ONCE have been jealous. I mean it as a member of a sane, eloquent society. It's VOMIT EMOJI. So second-hand embarrassing and obvious. Like, from the most random stuff to the shit he never would've tolerated from me or from any of our friends, with her everything's like Of Course Your Majesty. You Are So Funny And So Charming. Huehuehue. Like? Good God Hets.

I swear I'm not bitter. Just very observant and frankly concerned for his brain cells in the most strictly friendly of ways. Thoughts and prayers for the straight.

Tale.

---

FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com

TO: morethanfamous@gmail.com

DATE: November 7, 8:36 PM

SUBJECT: No comment

Tale,

For someone who definitely isn't bitter you do sound like a burnt cup of black coffee, no sugar.

However, I understand exactly what you mean. My best friends are all currently draping over their respective girl loves, only I find it very funny to witness. Thoughts and prayers for the straight indeed.

However easier they have it, they still need all the help they can get. I don't know about most straights, but mine are genuinely, endearingly hysterical. Like watching a nature documentary. Don't be too hard on your individual. From my observations, not realising the girls they have a crush on are doing and pretty much represent the opposite of their usual ways seems to be part of the process for them. Must be where the phrase 'opposites attract' comes from.

I guess instead of cringing you could try to find it funny? If you do like him and that's why you're mad instead of entertained, you can tell me. Really. Talking about these things is, well, kind of what I thought the point of talking to each other was? You don't have to if you don't want to, just thought I should make it clear that you can.

Davy.

---

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: November 7, 9:02 PM  
SUBJECT: RE: No comment

Davy,

Awe, look at you, being a concerned citizen. No really, I'm not jealous I SWEAR. That crush is DEAD. Has been for a while now. Now I'm only haunted by its ghost. And I think even that's in the process of exorcising or cleansing or whatever the ghost-appropriate ritual is.

But if I WAS jealous... would YOU be???

Haha jk ... unless?

Tale.

---

FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com  
TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com  
DATE: November 8, 1:26 AM

SUBJECT: RE: No comment

Nobutthatwasaseriousquestion

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FROM: morethanfamous@gmail.com

TO: iamstandingup@gmail.com

DATE: November 8, 6:35 AM

SUBJECT: RE: No comment

ANSWERMEORISWEARIWON'TBEABLETOFOCUSONMYTESTANDFAILFOR

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FROM: iamstandingup@gmail.com

TO: morethanrich@gmail.com

DATE: November 8, 6:57 AM

SUBJECT: RE: No comment

Tale,

Maybe. Now go get an A.

And take a nap at some point. Good God.

Davy.

P.S. Perfect academic career? And I'm the nerd here?

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

having them talk to each other about each other unknowingly is the dramatic irony i live for as a writer so i sincerely hope you all find it as funny as i do. and if you don't i'm really sorry skefrdsvber.

anyhow, thanks so MUCH to everyone reading this and even more so to those of you who are actually enjoying it? i cry everytime. kudos and comments make my life.

work is about to get way easier and then winter

break woo so i expect to update more regularly. for questions comments and concerns you can also find me on twitter as @kaspbraktm and i'll shut up now



## 17. Chapter 17

### Notes for the Chapter:

Once again a warning for some homophobic behavior. We know Derry straight up sucks.

There is something about the word ‘maybe’ that *whams* Richie. He cannot find a better way to put it than *wham*. It takes him aback as soon as he reads it, and he cannot pinpoint exactly why. He can come up with a few guesses. It’s somewhat *flirty*. Then he decides that is not it. Because he and Davy have been flirty before, in their own way. Only for all the fun it had been, he really hadn’t wanted to think of it as anything more than that, mindless fun – at least not on Davy’s behalf. His behalf had gone from somewhat serious to what you might consider dead serious. But he’d gotten to know Davy’s particular humour to an extent, so he hasn’t let himself discard the possibility that *he* is only joking.

Then he realises what it is about the maybe that whams him so. It’s *indefinite*. Davy is a yes or no person. From blatantly ignoring a joke or a comment he simply doesn’t want to deal with to answering openly and honestly to Richie’s endless pestering questions, he’s always very definite.

*That’s* what feels different to Richie. Maybe is maybe. Not yes, not no. Just *maybe*. What he is to make of it he’s not sure yet. It could mean nothing and by giving meaning to it and acting on it he could spoil things. Only it could mean everything, and by brushing it off he could be shutting the door he’s so eagerly been trying to pry open. That is the downside of Davy’s definiteness. He feels as if he’s constantly one slip up away from him disappearing, scared off for good. Because with him he just **knows** it would be for good. No warning, no second chance. Just gone.

Not to mention that he’s already slipped up in the worst way imaginable. The reminder sits on his desk in the shape of Henry Bower’s uncompleted assignments due next week, stocked in a neat pile. He takes a deep breath, shuts his eyes and does his best to push those thoughts aside for the time being. He has fifteen minutes to get

to school, and the entire school day to think of anything *but*.

Except he's finding thinking of anything else almost impossible. The word maybe keeps circling his head. Davy *is* maybe. Maybe in the same class, in the same room, even in the same row as him. Maybe a face he passes on the hallway on the way to his next period. Maybe sitting at the library as Richie walks across it. And maybe, maybe, as nervous about having sent that e-mail as Richie often was. Maybe waiting for a response Richie doesn't have yet.

By the time he's solving his French Quiz, taking it feels ridiculous. He scribbles his way through it quickly and without much real thought. The thought he's actually having is how if he does get an A, he should take a picture of it and send it to Davy. Then he really wants the A.

Even after double checking and doodling on it for a bit, he finishes the Quiz with twenty minutes to spare. Twenty minutes sound perfect to go to the parking lot, have a smoke, think his Davy related thoughts, and come back inside just in time for lunch. It's a pleasant prospect, until he forces himself to remember he has *plenty* of schoolwork to do. Schoolwork times two. He needs all the spare time he can get. He stops by his locker to retrieve 'The Great Gatsby', which he and Bowers both have an essay about due Wednesday, and then heads to the cafeteria to read while the others arrive.

Except, there's *someone* already at their table. It takes a double take for him to realise no claims nor treaties have been broken. It's just Patricia. He's still unfamiliar with the shape of her hair, and her face, and her overall *presence*. Unfamiliar and annoyed. He can add that to the list of inexplicable, irrational feelings he wishes to swat away, and that he does his best not to act on. She feels his stare on her and looks up from her phone, smiling. He smiles back and walks towards her. A part of him, the nice one, is grateful for it. Otherwise he might have given in to the temptation of turning on his back and reading at the library instead.

"Hiya" she greets him.

"Howdy-do" he tips an invisible hat, and slumps in the seat in front of hers.

They sit in front of each other in silence for a few minutes. She's looking at her phone and he's flipping the pages of his book, not registering a word. The silence feels wrong. The silence feels like it's on *him*, and he thinks he should rectify that. He should try. So try he will. He snaps his book shut and looks up to her. "So, Pat Patricia", he asks in what he's determined to be his southern sheriff voice, "what brings ya this early to this side of town?"

"Well, I got kicked out of Physics" she shrugs timidly.

He can't help raising his eyebrows in genuine surprise. "My my, and only on your first week?"

"Only on my first week" she nods. "Mr. Wuttenberg was being kind of awful. I held it in for as long as I could but then I just" she mimics snapping a twig with her hands and makes a *chk* sound.

"Colour me intrigued" he leans in, cupping his chin with his left hand. "What was he being awful about? You don't need to tell me it was his fault. Guy's an asshole"

"Hmm," she doesn't do a very good job at hiding the fact that 'asshole' isn't the kind of language people use around her often. "I figured. He Snaped me"

"Snaped you?"

"Yes. You know, like Severus Snape"

"Okay, *nerd*" he pauses, not doing a very good job at making it clear he's kidding. "How?"

"We were solving these problems. He asked questions about the steps, I answered them at first, because no one else would, but after a few he started ignoring me. And I let him. Until I just blurted an answer because the classroom was quiet as a graveyard and I decided to have some mercy on the man. It always makes me feel bad when teachers are left hanging. I don't know. But he told me to *shut up*. He said it was my fault no one else was learning because I was yelling the answers without giving anyone else as much as a chance to *think*. So I said no, that I hadn't said a thing for ten minutes and that if no one

was learning it was probably because *he* wasn't doing a very good job. He said that how come I had the answers then, and I said, in New York I had an excellent teacher with manners, and that's when he told me if I already knew everything then I should just leave. No teacher had ever spoken to me like that, so I did leave. I still can't believe it, but I did"

Richie whistles. Because, well, he's somewhat impressed. Both by her and by the fact that she could've explained all of that in the phrase 'for knowing the answers', but rambled instead. He *has* to like that about her. "Impressive, Hermione"

That should make it clear he's all friendly spirits. She smiles. "Thanks, Ron."

"Ron?" he scrunches his face, "No way. See this handsome face? Obviously a Harry" he flashes a grin at her.

"Other than the glasses? I don't know if I see it" she tilts her head as if to examine him, and he poses.

"Why not? I'm full protagonist material, baby. You just don't know it yet" he clicks his tongue.

"I guess" she pauses. "I'll have to get back to you in a few months then"

"About whuh-what?" Bill asks, out of nowhere. He can be eerily quiet sometimes.

"How I'm the chosen one and obvious protagonist of life" Richie replies, grinning again. "My good Patmione here begs to differ. Thoughts?"

"Puh-Puh-Patmione? Duh-Don't tell me the Puh-Potter thing is spruh-spreading. And to yuh-you of all uh-puh-people" Bill teases looking at Richie, though he's smiling.

"Why you of all people?" Pat asks with genuine curiosity.

*"Thuh-There it goes"*

"I've only seen like two of the movies and slept through half of them. I have beef with the thing. *Sue me*" Richie admits shamelessly.

"You're *kidding*" she gapes. "What beef could you *possibly* have?"

"That it's not Lord of the Rings" he explains matter-of-factly. It's an obviousness.

"Okay, that. I don't. First, they're *nothing* alike. And second, how would you even know?"

"Duh-Don't even truh-try" Bill interjects, "thuh-that's buh-buh-been his hill to duh-die on since the third gruh-grade"

"It's my taking stand for good literature. It's a principle of academia. Nay, a principle of *taste*" Richie argues.

"A pruh-principle of puh-puh-pissing Eddie off, muh-more like" Bill chuckles.

And it amazes Richie how he can just say that. Have the rest of them really not noticed a thing? Well, *the* thing. Not just what happened recently, with the party and Eddie being unfairly, *unbelievably* touchy after that, but everything.

How he can say it and not know he shouldn't, because it stings. It stings because it'd been true. He can still remember it clearly. Eddie buying the first book at the Scholastic Fair and not talking of anything but for a week. Eddie being upset when his mother took it away because the women at her church group didn't think books about witchcraft were fit for a young boy to read. He and Bill finding him crying at the library an afternoon not too soon after. Fully crying, because his mother had refused to give him his copy back, let alone buy him any of the next ones. He'd borrowed one from the library, he'd explained, only his mother had found it, and hidden it, and now it was lost so he couldn't return it or borrow anything else. Eddie being so distressed and embarrassed by it and by crying about it he could barely breathe. Bill borrowing all of them out of the library for him over the next months, one by one. Richie wishing that'd been his idea from day one. Eddie ignoring them during recess to read. Richie comparing it to The Hobbit and calling Eddie a Hobbit

in revenge.

“Only doing my noble duty. Someone had to keep that phase of his in check” he explains in swift recovery.

“Nuh-No one kuh-kept *your* Guh-Ghost Squh-Squad Revolution puh-phase in check” Bill grins.

Pat stares at them, with a look of half-understanding. Only she wouldn't ever understand half of it.

“Don't say the G-S-R words around *him*” Mike exclaims, making his way to the seat next to Richie, “you don't want to know what it could unleash” he looks at Pat.

“Only exclusive, academic, encyclopaedic knowledge you should all be so lucky to hear” Richie retorts.

“We *have* been so lucky” Stan adds from behind Mike and heads next to Pat, “and you'll be lucky to be spared” he smiles at her.

“But *I'm* the nerd?” Pat asks Richie with a hesitant smile.

“Yes!” Richie exclaims.

“Why are you a nerd?” Stan asks her, doing something with his face Richie doesn't recognize.

“I used Snape as a verb” she explains.

“In your defense, you *did* get Snaped.” How Stan knows about what happened already if he takes Biology and why he is joking along with it, Richie doesn't want to know.

He feels a hand ruffle his hair, and isn't surprised when Bev slides into the seat next to his. She only meets his gaze for a minute, as her gaze immediately goes to Pat. And to high-fiving her. “*Dude!*” she exclaims, “Ben told me what you did. I mean, you've probably doomed that entire class since he's gonna be an asshole to them for the rest of the semester, but worth it if you ask me. I had him last year and can sincerely say, *fuck* that guy”

Bev beams at her, scrunching her nose. She would kill him if he said it, but he can tell it's one of her mother like gestures. It's proud and encouraging and hamster cute. He loves it.

"I guess" Pat shrugs, smiling the smallest smile. And he thinks he's starting to like Pat, too. The face she makes when people curse around her. You'd believe *she's* the small-town girl in the group of big city kids. "I hope not, though. I'd feel terrible about that."

"Yeah," Richie says solemnly, adjusting his glasses, "I'd feel terrible about fucking Mr. Wuttenberg too" and he grins madly. That's it. He's officially welcomed her into his heart. And it's a place that takes some adjusting to, judging by the horrified look on her face.

"Beep *beep*, Richie" those familiar with the phrase chant, and boo and Mike throws a napkin at his face. But it's warm and friendly and he laughs. In a second they're all laughing too. Well, Pat is just smiling in genuine confusion.

"Don't look at me" he says to her, "you walked straight into that one."

At that very moment, Eddie and Ben slump into their seats. Eddie next to Stan, Ben next to Beverly. That's a second strike on Ben and Beverly today, he notices. He gives her a look she most definitely, very deliberately ignores. "Already martyrs of Pat's revolution?" she asks them instead.

Ben nods. "He was furious. He told us to figure everything out by ourselves, and assigned us five new worksheets. Thirty problems total. Due *Tuesday*"

"He's insane. Clinically insane." Eddie says, with a determined look on his face. Richie wants to feel sorry for him, for them, but finds himself feeling amused instead.

"If Eddie uses the word *clinically* it *must* be a serious case. My sympathies" Mike half-jokes, squeezing Eddie's arm. Eddie does that thing he knows him to do where he pretends to be annoyed by something but doesn't stop it because he isn't, not really.

"I'm sorry" Pat says, though her smile hasn't faded entirely. "We can solve them together, if that's any help"

"It's not your fault" Ben reassures her, offering a smile. "Everyone knows what you said is true. He *is* pretty bad"

"Fuck's sake," Richie snaps, tilting his head up to slip his glasses in place. "*Pretty bad*. Just say he fucking sucks. That he's absolute shit. That he's tripping mad freaking balls. Learn from Patricia. *Live like Patricia*" and with that he strikes a zen pose.

A silence lingers. A silence Richie feels could be tense, except he hears a snicker. Ben's? Definitely Ben's. "*Fuck him*, then" he says quietly. That breaks Pat too, and Stan breaks right along with her. Mike lets out the loudest snort.

"Huh-Hate to bruh-break it to you, but he's already *tuh-taken*" Bill divinely intervenes. That's what sets everyone into full roaring laughter again.

"They grow up so fast" Richie wipes a fake tear from his face. He leans over to try and ruffle both their heads at once. On his way to Ben he meets Eddie's gaze, and finds it oddly softened. Not what it used to be, but he's still smiling and shaking his head at him. And it's a nice thing to see. The whole table is. He can't remember the last time it looked like that. *Felt* like that. Everyone laughing. At the same time, at the same thing. Mike being the loudest, with his whole chest and his back arched. Beverly propped on her elbows. Stan covering his face. It feels like the togetherness he'd missed to much has returned almost completely. And then there's Pat, doing a weird gawky laugh. His next thought is *I really wish Davy could meet all of you. I really wish he were sitting here*.

Before he knows it the bell rings again. And again. And he's sitting in History with Mrs. Zymanski. She must be seventy something and trying her best. But her best is extremely quiet and boring and he finds himself itching to write. To write to Davy, specifically. Only he's strictly forbidden himself to even have G-Mail installed on his phone while at school, and the maybe he received hasn't gotten any clearer. So he texts Bev instead.



**lol whats up w u n ben ?**

*what. do you mean*

**i mean whats up w u n ben COMMA beaver. i c u**

*you see no-thing*

**I SEE EVERYTHING !!!!**

*you are literally legally blind*

**TouChe**

**but u legally owe me a heart to heart so spill**

*ok. but not on text, you animal. waffle dinner?*

**i love u and ur paying**

They sit at their favourite booth of the *one* iHop in town. It's strategically selected to be in a corner with no close proximity to the bathroom nor the Kid Zone. The place is rather empty for a Friday afternoon. It isn't surprising. It's in a part of town locals tend to avoid. There's mostly restaurants and venues and bars for the occasional tourists, and truckers, and passers-by. He gets a full breakfast sampler just for the thrill of getting something with the word breakfast on it at almost seven pm, and she gets her waffles. They're seated across from each other, so once the waiter leaves, he can lean over to her in the most exaggerate of motions and bat his eyes.

"So, *tell me about the boy*" he says in a high-pitched voice he has yet to think a backstory for. Cool-mom but better.

"You know the boy" she replies timidly, turning her attention to the maple syrups. "There isn't much to say about him"

"You like each other. Confirm or deny."

"He likes me. And I think I could like him" she's moved onto the sugar packets, fidgeting with them in their little basket. "I don't know"

"How can you *not* know. It's a feeling. Either it is or it ain't"

She sighs and rolls her eyes at him. "That's a lie and you know it"

He shrugs. *Maybe. Either it is, or it ain't.* Then he clears his throat and leans back, crossing his arms around his chest.

"Tell me, Beverly. Where do you believe these doubts come from? Where do they originate? *Look within*" he deepens his voice in a passable impersonation of Mr. Loze, their school counsellor. They'd both been sent with him more than once. Beverly more than twice on account of being caught smoking.

She snorts and shakes her head. Only he finds himself staring, genuinely expecting her to answer. She notices and straightens up. "*I don't know*"

"*That's a lie and you know it*" he raises his voice again, only this time high enough to match hers.

She takes a deep breath and sighs again. "This is what you want to cash *your* heart to heart in for? Really?"

"Yes."

"Okay. *Because* I owe you"

"And love me" he grins.

"Only sometimes" she sticks out her tongue. "Now let me introspect."

They sit quietly for a few minutes, her face blank. He's trying to read into it. He knows it's not *her* answer he's looking for, not really, but he'll take any answer he can get. Finally, she speaks.

"Because I know how much he likes me. I think everyone does. And I have to be sure I like *him*. For him. Not just that I like being liked. Or that I don't want everyone else mad at me, because they know. And because *I* know he is so sweet and gentle I'd be mad at me too, if it went wrong. I don't know" she's still fiddling with the sugar packets. When she looks up at him again it strikes him that it wasn't an easy thing to say.

"No, that makes sense" he reassures her, taking her hand. "You do you. Whatever you want. I'll kick anyone and everyone's ass if I have to"

"*Same to you*" she squeezes his hand. He squeezes back.

And at that moment, there is a loud CRASH. They both jump in their seats. They turn to see a waiter promptly bent down on the floor, picking up spillage. They're not the only ones staring. It seems that's all there is to it and heads start turning, until the customer in front of that poor waiter gets up from his table and kicks the broken plates. Then he kicks the waiter's chest.

"Sir" another nearby waiter quickly steps in, standing between them. "Anything the matter?"

"Sure as hell something's the matter" the guy says loudly enough to draw everyone's attention back to him, in case he'd lost it. "Your guy over here, Peter, is it? Was coming onto me"

"Excuse me?" the second waiter asks at the same time as Peter meekly says, "I *wasn't*"

"You heard it. I know what this part of town's like, full of queers, and this one started battin' eyes the minute I walked in. I can bear it, I say, 'cause I'm a nice man like that. 'Til the little prick rubbed my leg"

"Marcus, I swear I didn't" Peter pleads.

"Sir, I'm sure it was a misunderstanding"

"Misunderstanding *my ass*"

"We can move you to another table if you like, but you can't –" Marcus starts offering.

"Forget it" the guy says, shoving past them. "Should've known better than to come here. It's like a fucking infestation" he adds, slamming the door behind him.

The entire restaurant sits in silence for a while. Richie feels their table is even more silent. They're still holding hands, he realises, as he feels Bev quietly rub her thumb against his palm. She's trying to be soothing. He sees her open and close her mouth a few times, not daring to look at him. Or say anything. He doesn't want to say anything either. Everyone around them slowly drifts back to their own business.

“That was” Bev musters softly.

He shakes his head. “Don’t”

“Rich”

He shakes his head harder. She doesn’t let go of his hand. And he knows that her answer doesn’t matter. Davy saying maybe doesn’t matter. None of it does. Because regardless of what he means by it, this town wouldn’t let them *be*. It wouldn’t. And it’s for the better that they don’t know who each other is. It’s better because it’s easier and it’s safer. It makes *all of it* easier too. Until they’re far away from here.

“Can we have it to go?” he asks their waiter as she passes by.

“Sure” she tells them politely enough.

Beverly doesn’t question it or stop it. She only stuffs sugar packets in her pockets and winks at him. He’s slightly cheered up by it. As they head out he smiles a small smile at Peter. Peter tries and fails to smile back.

They eat in his car. He turns on the radio and neither of them talks for a better long time. He thinks thoughts she might want to say. What he would say to himself. That *that wasn’t so bad, was it? That at least the guy left. That, no one got hurt so it could’ve been worse, right?*

Every one of those thoughts infuriates him. He inwardly thanks her for not saying anything like that. Because why do he and this Peter have to hold their breaths, hoping it doesn’t get worse? Why does it have to be bad at all? Will it really be better anywhere else?

“I hate it here” he speaks, finally.

“I know” she says. “Me too”

“Love that *you’re* here, though. You can’t leave ‘til I do. So suck it” he tells her.

“I’m rubber, you’re glue” She leans her head on his shoulder. Eventually they drive home.

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

didn't proofread this tho sorry!!!! hope you enjoy and  
just know these boys WILL be happy they WILL